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COUNTRY COTERIES.

VOL. I.

COUNTRY COTERIES.

BY

GEORGIANA LADY CHATTERTON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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COUNTRY COTERIES.

CHAPTER I.

Three Generations.

8 Nov 58 m. Hake - 30
9 Nov 58 m. Hake - 30
Buckingham 31 Dec 58
“AND then you will have such pleasant neighbours. I am sure you will find Oakhampton Hall delightful,” said Mrs. Dronington to her daughter, who had just returned to England from a long residence abroad. “I know there are many agreeable families in that part of the county, and I am so glad that at last Sir Charles is going to live at the old place, and take up his proper position in the county, very glad; and you will find the country neighbours very hospitable and pleasant. I never enjoyed anything more than the winter I spent at Oakhampton Hall, with old Sir Edward, twenty-

six years ago, the year before you married. And——”

“I hate country neighbours, and it will be all the worse if they are hospitable. Of course they are bores ; I never saw a country neighbour that was not. Always dropping in at the wrong time, and they are sure to be stupid and huffy, so pray don't hold them out as an inducement to like Oakhampton,” said Lady Lillyford, with an ill-humoured and contemptuous expression on her naturally handsome features. “I know I shall never be able to stand England at all ; and now you disgust me still more by holding out my particular detestation, country neighbours, as an inducement to like that poky, damp, dull old place. We shall all get fevers and agues, and be moped to death besides. It is so particularly hard too, just as that delightful Mr. Brookfield was really making up to Beatrice (she was quite taken with him too), that we were obliged to leave Rome all of a sudden, because Sir Charles took it into

his head to come into Parliament. I am sure I often wish old Sir Edward had never died, for really we got on so well abroad. I hate these nasty fogs, and horrible east winds too. No, I hate it all, and always shall, and I don't at all agree with people who are always pestering me with their congratulations on old Sir Edward dying and leaving us that old place."

"I wonder they congratulate you on poor Sir Edward's death," said Mrs. Dronington, with a matter-of-fact gravity that showed she was equally devoid of satire and fun, "for I am sure he was a very excellent man, and did his duty well for all his cousins. He was certainly rather gloomy, and after he lost his pretty young wife and only child he shut himself up at Oakhampton, and scarcely saw a human being from one year's end to another. I certainly am afraid the place must be a good deal out of repair, for he only inhabited two rooms in one wing for many years."

“Oh, I dare say it will cost a fortune to put in order; and then they say it’s haunted, and though I’m not so foolish as to believe in ghosts myself, it’s very inconvenient if the servants get frightened. Dear Lady Honoria Nolan was actually obliged to leave their place in Norfolk, where there was a ghost, because they could not get any servants to remain. No, I hate ghosts.”

“Oh, mamma! that’s the only thing I have heard about Oakhampton that interests me,” said Beatrice, who bounded into the room at this moment. “I long so to see a ghost. You know there really is one in that old Castle near Udine, where a beautiful girl, who was to have been married to its possessor, appears very often.”

“Don’t tell me such nonsense, Beatrice; and see how badly your hair is dressed, that stupid Martha has no more idea of dressing hair than our new English butler has of dressing salad or making coffee.”

Beatrice looked at herself in the glass to

see what was amiss, and seemed pretty well satisfied with the result. And justly so, for she had more than an average share of beauty—as much so, as good features, complexion and colouring can form beauty, where expression is wanting. Her face said nothing, but whether it was ever intended to speak, remained to be seen.

I have sometimes observed that sort of expressionless look and manner to be the result of a very desultory education, or of none at all. Girls, who from early childhood have lived abroad, too often seem to become the embodiment of flippancy. Is it that the habit of living in a state of negation, always protesting, as it were, against the manners, religion, and usages of those around them, whilst they are at the same time living apart from the realities and distinct atmosphere of their own nation, arrests the development of their sympathies?

Although some persons are so fond of

living abroad, that, like Sir Charles and Lady Lillyford, they cannot bear to (what they call) settle down in England, yet these very persons are often the most loud in their abuse of the country they happen to be in, of its religion, politics, and habits, and are the least disposed to form intimacies with the natives. This sort of antagonistic life is peculiarly pernicious to people of indolent temperament, and to those devoid of deep feeling or affections.

Beatrice had better natural qualities than her mother, and possessed stronger feelings, therefore all would now depend upon the hands into which she might fall. She had been regularly out for one winter in Rome, and one season at some German baths, where she was much admired. She had plenty of partners at all the balls, but no proposal, though her mother maintained that Mr. Brookfield was on the point of proposing when they suddenly left Rome. It was well known that Beatrice would not be rich,

for she had three brothers, the eldest of whom was inclined to be wild and extravagant, and two little sisters.

If anyone had asked Lady Lillyford seriously whether she would like to part with her daughter, she would have said, "Certainly not." Yet she sometimes took it as a personal affront that Beatrice had as yet received no offer, and had been even heard to express her apprehensions that she would die an old maid ; in fact, she made a constant grievance of that sudden departure from Rome. In vain Sir Charles reminded her, when she spoke to him about it during their journey home, that if Mr. Brookfield really meant anything, he would follow them to England as soon as the tour he had intended to make in the East with his friend Mr. Sterndale, was ended.

"But then he may die in the meantime of Nile fever, or be eaten up by crocodiles, or have some other dreadful end," moaned Lady Lillyford. "Besides, the girl is broken-

hearted, I know she is, she has never cared about her dress ever since."

There did not, however, seem to be much amiss with her dress, as Beatrice looked at herself that morning in the glass, yet she turned from the contemplation of her pretty face with something approaching to a sigh. Perhaps the prominent idea in her mind was, "What is the use of this beauty, if he—" but the question was scarcely defined enough to be dwelt on, for she turned suddenly to her grandmother and said,

"You like England, though, and even country houses, I think; why should we expect to find them so very dull, I can't imagine."

"I don't think you will, only your mamma has taken up such a prejudice against country neighbours. But there is the carriage at the door now, so pray put on your things, or we shall be late for church."

On their arrival in England a few days

before, Lady Lillyford and her daughter had been staying with Mrs. Dronington in Wimpole Street, and were still there on the morning when this narrative commences. Sir Charles Lillyford had gone direct to Oakhampton Hall to take possession of his estates, and to ascertain how far the house was fit for the reception of his family. Their two little girls remained in a school in Paris. Of their three sons two were still at school, and Roland, the eldest, who had lately got into difficulties and had been obliged to sell out of the Guards, was now making a tour of visits in country houses, where his handsome person and agreeability made him welcome in spite of his debts and—but more of him hereafter.

This dispersion of the family enabled Mrs. Dronington to receive Lady Lillyford and Beatrice (the only remaining ones of the party) in the one spare bed and dressing-room her house afforded. Beatrice had never been in England, nor had she ever

seen her grandmother since she was three years old. She found, to her great surprise, that she felt as if she had known the old lady all her life, and liked her extremely; but not so London. It was the middle of November, and as she had only seen the ugly opposite houses of that dull street through a fog, she was not very favourably impressed as yet by what she saw of England. She felt, indeed, peculiarly dull on that dark Sunday morning as she drove through the dingy streets to Grosvenor Chapel, or rather she seemed to lose the contrary sensation—the recollection of having ever felt otherwise; and there was not much in the monotonous service to rouse her into a more hopeful condition, pronounced, as it was, amid the dense and smoky atmosphere pervading the place, which seemed to stifle or obliterate the remembrance of all the sunny lands she had been visiting. Yet towards the end of the sermon she was awakened from this state

of torpor, not by the sermon itself, but by the sight of a young girl in a pew at a little distance—a face which suddenly gave her a joyous bound, and reminded her of some of the most beautiful scenery she had ever beheld, and also of the happiest days she had ever spent.

She thought the sermon never would end, so great was her impatience to speak to Elfrida Somerton (for that was the name of the young girl) and her mother, and learn where they were and all about them, for she had never seen or heard of them since they had parted at Sorento two years before. She found herself caring so much, so eagerly and curiously about them, that she was almost startled at her own sudden anxiety.

“It must be that Elfrida’s pretty face recalls those beautiful scenes, and thus helps me to forget this dingy, foggy, stuffy place,” thought she in clearer words than her thoughts had yet ever expressed themselves

to her own mind. "And Mrs. Somerton, what a beautiful old lady she is! How much happier I should be if mamma would like her, and let me be with her. And Roland, I don't think he would have become so wild, and ran so much into debt, if Mrs. Somerton could have been much with him. She always interested and amused one so, and made one feel the importance of all one did or said."

In this manner Beatrice continued during the remainder of the sermon, to define her own impressions of one of the most remarkable women of modern times, and perhaps the new process may have been almost of as much use to her as the dull words of a badly-diluted text which the clergyman was droning out.

At last it was over, and Beatrice rushed out of the pew with such unusual impetuosity, that her mother and grandmother were quite startled.

"Oh! dear Elfrida, how glad I am!" she

whispered to the young girl who had absorbed her thoughts as they met each other near the doorway. "Do tell me how it is you are in England!—never mind the others—let's go on."

Lady Lillyford was rather shortsighted, and she always made the most of the infirmity when she was unwilling to see too quick or too plainly.

"Who can those people be?" she whispered to her mother, as her daughter disappeared with them through the open door. "Oh! I remember; I really believe it is that Blue they made such a fuss with at Rome. She is a great linguist and historian, and writes upon tombs and worlds and stars, and all manner of uncomfortable things. I never liked them, and they are dreadfully poor. I'm very sorry they are come to England; I thought they lived always abroad. I hope Roland will not see that girl, for he was dreadfully smitten with her in Rome."

“Yet you ought now to wish him to marry,” said Mrs. Dronington—“it would steady him, perhaps.”

“Yes, but not a girl with no fortune, like Miss Somerton; he has too much debt for that. How fast they are walking! Well, I’m sure *I* don’t wish to renew my acquaintance with them, if they don’t choose to turn round. Oh! they are knocking at that door. Stop, let us walk slower, till they are safe in, and then I suppose Beatrice will come back and look after us.”

“Mrs. Somerton!—surely I have heard the name!” said Mrs. Dronington. “Yes, I knew her when she was a girl, before she went abroad. Well, you must, at any rate, let *me* go to see her when I have an opportunity.”

“Oh! mamma, how delightful!” said Beatrice, as she joined her mother a few minutes afterwards. “Only think, they are actually going to live in the next village to Oakhampton—an old manor-house

in a pretty garden has been left to them lately; and they know all about the place, too, for they are related, you know, to the late Lady Lillyford."

"And have they got any fortune as well as a house?"

"No, I believe not; but Mrs. Somerton is publishing some wonderful book, and has made a great deal by it, Elfrida told me."

"Oh! that can't be much," said Lady Lillyford; "and I daresay it is so dull, one couldn't read it. I'm sure I wouldn't give half-a-crown for all the ologies that were ever invented. And what a bore it will be, having them actually as country neighbours; they will be more unbearable than ever."

Lady Lillyford was hungry after the fatigue (as she called it) of sitting out a long service in such a stuffy church, and as the luncheon they found ready for them on their return home was very good, she was for some time pleasantly employed in the process of eating it. Not much conversa-

tion passed, for Beatrice was more full of thought than usual, and perhaps instinctively felt that the purport of her thoughts would not be very acceptable to her mother, or very intelligible to her grandmother; yet she had a sort of vague feeling that the latter would sympathize with her most.

At last, when the slices of plum-pudding which had come up from the servants' dinner had been disposed of, she ventured to say,

“You liked Oakhamptom very much, did you not, grandmamma?—and did you ever hear of such a strange, dreadful thing that happened there? I now remember that Elfrida told me about it when we were at Sorrento, but I never knew till now that it was at Oakhampton the dreadful event happened.”

“What was it?” inquired Lady Lillyford, with her mouth full of cake, and her mind full of a vague wish to know something more against the old place.

“Surely you must have heard what I suppose Elfrida means.”

“Well, I suppose I did; but it is so long ago. Something about the poor child being burnt alive in its cradle, and supposed to have been purposely done by some girl that—that—but really, Beatrice, I don’t see what right Miss Somerton has to talk of such improper things. I should not have suspected her of *that*.”

“I am sure she did not know there was anything wrong in talking of it,” said Beatrice, blushing at the imputation cast by her mother on her friend. “Besides, those who did wrong were so awfully punished.”

“Well, go upstairs now, Beatrice, and read some good book, and mamma shall tell me, for I’m sure it isn’t proper for you to know anything about it.”

Beatrice gladly obeyed; but whether she found any good book, and if so whether it did her much good, remains to be seen.

CHAPTER II.

*Lady Lillyford wishes to know the worst
at once.*

“NOW, tell me, for I should like to know
the worst,” said Lady Lillyford.

“There was something, I remember, about
a horrible room where the poor child was
burnt, and old Sir Edward never would
have it repaired, or allow anybody to go
into it. Oh! dear, it makes me quite
shudder to think of; I hope Charles will
have the sense to take it down, or build it
up, or something, but he is so indifferent and
harum-scarum, I daresay he will do nothing.
I know we shall be moped to death; and I
daresay that was why poor Lady Lillyford
died so young.”

“Oh! no; hers was a very melancholy

history—don't you remember the particulars?"

"No, not exactly; except, I suppose, she was jealous of that girl when she discovered something wrong about her husband."

"Yes, it nearly broke her heart; but Sir Edward was so penitent and devoted to her, that after the birth of her child I heard she quite recovered. Never was anything like his adoration of her, they said; and she was getting quite well and happy again, when one night the room where the baby was sleeping took fire, and the child was burnt in its cradle, and the nurse suffocated in the bed near."

"And the village girl was supposed to have something to do with it, was she not?"

"Yes, so it was said, but nothing could be proved; but Sir Edward never would see her again, nor her child either, though he had him well educated abroad. I think it was very lucky for you and your children that he took such a dislike to the child and

its mother. I believe he only left a few hundreds to her, and as he had the power to leave a great deal away, most people thought he would have made the boy his heir. That was why I maintain that he has always been wonderfully kind to his cousins and cousins' children. He not only paid for Roland's commission, besides his college debts, but made both him and Beatrice an allowance."

"Yes, but Roland's allowance was so small, poor fellow, that he could not help getting into debt, and then was actually obliged to sell out, so you see it has been of no use to him at all."

"Well, but that was not poor Sir Edward's fault; and he need not have paid for the commission, or made him any allowance."

"That *would* have been hard indeed, for I am sure we could not have afforded to give our sons good educations, so I don't know what would have become of them at

all. And now I don't know what is to be done with Roland, if he can't keep out of debt; and he'll be sure to go and marry some penniless, silly girl, like that Miss Somerton, and her mother a deaf old invalid, too; but I believe it was half fancy, for she could sit up all night writing her stupid books, and go poking about all day excavating the rocks and tombs. Well, I am determined I won't call upon them when we get to Oakhampton. It shan't be said that I was so insensible to my son's welfare as to cultivate the acquaintance of such people; of a poor girl, who sets herself up for a beauty and a wit."

Nothing could be more opposite from the truth than this accusation of Lady Lillyford's, for Elfrida Somerton was peculiarly humble, and had almost a painfully low opinion of herself; but Mrs. Dronington was not acquainted with her, and therefore could not contradict the assertion, though she might have suspected, from the tone of her daugh-

ter's voice, that she herself scarcely believed her own words.

"I sometimes think," said Mrs. Dronington, "that you would all have done better if you had never gone and lived abroad, but had settled down in that nice dower-house at Oakhampton poor Sir Edward offered to give his cousin Sir Charles rent-free. I don't see any good it has been to the children."

"Oh! what can you mean?" said Lady Lillyford, lifting up her hands with a gesture of horror. "Surely you would not have had the children grow up without any education at all—no masters or anything to be had?"

"Well, I don't see that Beatrice is so very accomplished, after all. To be sure, I am an old-fashioned woman, and I suppose don't fully appreciate modern improvements; but it seems to me she sings out of tune, and does not play on the pianoforte much better than I did on the harpsichord; my playing

was really very much admired when I was young (though I never had any better master than the organist of —— Cathedral), and so was my singing.”

“Oh! I daresay it was very fine; but then you can’t compare an old squeaking harpsichord, about three octaves long, with a fine Erard piano. It must have been easy enough to play on such a tin-kettle as that. Besides, how foolishly you talk, as if Signor Maggiortuono or Fieravoce could help Beatrice having a bad ear. I know it is very difficult for her to keep in tune, and her hands are not strong enough for these grand pianos, but that’s not the fault of the master.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Dronington; “but does it not prove that it was hardly worth while to sacrifice so much for instruction in things she had no natural turn for?”

“Not at all—it would have been much worse without. Besides, who was to teach her French, and Italian, and German, draw-

ing and dancing, if we had been buried down at Oakhampton?"

"Perhaps a governess; and then remember she was the only girl at that time, and I always thought it very hard for the boys to have no home in England to come to in the holidays. I doubt whether Roland would have turned out so very wild if he had been able to pass his vacations in the country; and if you had all been settled near Oakhampton, it might have drawn poor old Sir Edward out of his misanthropic state; besides, as he always regarded your husband and Roland as his heirs, the boy would have learnt to take an interest in the place, and the county families in him."

"There you are again, always harping upon country families and neighbours, as if the railroads had not made everybody quite independent of any such old nonsense as that long ago."

"Well, it remains to be proved whether it was nonsense or not," said Mrs. Droning-

ton with some annoyance in her tone. She was a person of few words, and easily dazed by her daughter's superior flow of them; but there was more solidity, if I may so express it, in her judgment—more of the repose of mind produced by the spirit of her age (for her childhood had begun in the last century), and by the tone and manner of woman's education and life in that day. Her natural judgment was, moreover, too good to be convinced by her daughter's paradoxes, or by the flippant, superficial views produced by the more extensive but not better education which was usually given to women in the second quarter of this century.

CHAPTER III.

English Home Scenery.

WE will now leave Lady Lillyford and her daughter to make the best or the worst of their foggy weather in Wimpole Street, and follow the young girl who seemed to have excited such a strange influence over Beatrice's undeveloped mind, and who had, with her mother, already taken up her abode in the pretty old house at Oakhampton village which had been left to them.

Mrs. Somerton had not lived abroad from choice—her late husband had been attacked with consumption, and ordered to a southern climate ; so he had been obliged to sell out of the army, and (moving about in

search of health) they struggled with extreme poverty for many years.

They first lived at Venice, near Mrs. Somerton's sister, who had married Count Rossi, a rich and noble Italian, possessing, besides his palace at Venice, large estates in Styria.

At the time when we first become acquainted with Mrs. Somerton in this narrative, her husband had been dead some years. She was already advanced in life, and suffered also from ill-health. But where the mind preponderates much over the body, to work is easier than to rest. Mrs. Somerton had been repeatedly recommended by physicians to lay down her pen and give her mind entire rest. But she had always been worse when she followed their advice.

"This is really enchanting!" said Mrs. Somerton, as she entered her little drawing-room at the old house where they had arrived the night before. "What a lovely view, and those quaint old casement win-

dows and the wainscoted walls are just what I admire.—No, my child, I don't regret that it has been painted white, for I shall see to write or read half an hour longer every day."

"And what sunsets we shall have too!" said her daughter Elfrida, who was equally pleased with their new abode. "If the sun comes out to-day, I think it will set behind those wooded heights on the right. How those distant pine-trees remind me of Italy, only all the near view is prettier than we usually had there."

"Yes, this is a truly English rural view of the best possible type, and nothing in the whole world can equal the enjoyment it gives me to look upon such a view once more. I never knew how much I pined for England—for English country life, till now. I can scarcely think how I have been able to exist all these years in banishment, and you have never seen England before! But I know you will love it even as I do," she

added, as she watched her daughter's face, and was delighted to read the expression of happy admiration depicted on it, while the young girl's eyes ranged from one object to another in the varied yet homely landscape.

“That square ivy-mantled tower might have given rise to the beautiful lines beginning—

‘The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,’ ”

said Elfrida. “And look there, surely Milton must have seen those meadows beyond the winding road? It must be there

‘Where the milkmaid singeth blithe,
And the mower whets his scythe,
And every shepherd tells his tale
Under the hawthorn in the dale.’

Then the entire view seems described in those lines—

‘Straight mine eye hath caught more pleasures,
Whilst the landscape round it measures ;
Russet lawns and fallows grey,
Where the nibbling flocks do stray.’

I see to the left, in the far distance, the high line of hills and steep downs,

'Mountains on whose barren breast
The labouring clouds do often rest,'

and beneath them where the

'Meadows brim with daisies pied,
Shallow brooks and rivers wide,
Towers and battlements it sees ;
Bosomed high in tufted trees.'

I never saw anything so cheering and cheerful as this view," said Elfrida, "and to go on with your quotation, perhaps we shall see

'Many a youth and many a maid
Dancing in the chequered shade.'

That scene must have been in his mind when he wrote

'These delights if thou canst give,
Mirth, with thee I mean to live.'

"Yes, it must have been such a scene as this," said Mrs. Somerton, "which called forth some of those delightful feelings that inspired Milton and Gray, and other pleasure poets, if I may venture to call them so, to write the lines which reproduce these fairest of country scenes, and still continue to give sensations of delight to those who

read their poems. According to my acceptation of the word sensation, we have now very few authors who appeal to the senses pleasantly. The harrowing tale which excites painful curiosity is called sensational, and it produces, perhaps, what many people require—distraction; by a counter-irritation it gives a kind of blistered relief from the anxieties or cares of the world or of disbelief.”

“ Ah! I see now what you mean by pleasure poets, and why we have so few now-a-days,” said Elfrida; “ and I think I see now why so few modern poets produce harmonious or pleasant feelings in my mind, although there may be no lack of harmony in the mechanism of their lines.”

“ Yes, because in striving to be purely intellectual they unconsciously despise the natural good instincts that prompt us to find harmony in all creation; and thus their writings are often a disagreeable and most in-harmonious mixture of wonderment and

defiance,—an angry querulousness at not being able satisfactorily to fathom the mystery of creation without the aid of revelation. They want to dispose of this perverse world, and mould all created things to suit their own views. But I see you are so absorbed in the contemplation of that view, that you scarcely heard what I said.”

“You are right, dear mamma, for I was looking at those gigantic oaks on the brow of that high hill in the middle distance, and the trees that crown that slope on the right; and I really think that must be one of the oaks—King Arthur’s seat, I think it is called, of which I have heard so much—in Oakhampton Park. And see, is not that a corner of the old house there peeping through the trees? What trees they are!”

“Yes, that is Oakhampton Hall,” said Mrs. Somerton with a sigh, and her countenance became suddenly overcast with an expression of pain. “I am almost sorry—yet, no—I am glad we can see the dear old

place. I shall think of my poor Matilda as I trust she is now, or as she was in her happy youth."

"How I wish I could have seen that poor Lady Lillyford," said Elfrida. "What an interesting person she must have been, from your description."

"Strange, strange, most strange," said Mrs. Somerton, with a sudden vehemence that made her turn quite pale. "It never struck me so forcibly till now; you have seen a wonderful likeness to her. You may remember I mentioned it one day when he was very sad—the day he left Munich."

"Who?—Mr. Luscombe?" said Elfrida with a blush and most tell-tale expression, as she cast her eyes down to hide the tears that filled them. "I remember it well; could he be related in any way?"

"Oh, no, quite the reverse," said Mrs. Somerton. "It is impossible, for I have since heard who he really is. I had better tell you now, perhaps, for I see he has made

a very deep impression on you. You should know the worst at once. He is the son of that very woman who caused the death of dear Lady Lillyford—the illegitimate son of Sir Edward. Fearing, or thinking, perhaps, (for I loved him so much that I scarcely feared), your heart was beginning to respond to his most evident love for you, I made inquiries and wrote to him. I will show you his letter on the subject. I would not talk of him all these long months, or encourage you to do so, because I wished to see whether the impression was strong enough to be so permanent as to counter-balance all the drawbacks. He is very poor. I find Sir Edward has only left him barely enough to start him in some profession ; and then, unless he succeeds well in it, he will have nothing to live upon.”

“And is that woman—is his mother alive?”

“They say not. She lived at York, and I heard she was dead two or three years

ago. It was so strange that she always refused to see her son, and the last time he tried, through his guardian Mr. Mordaunt, to gain access to her presence, she treated the request with such contemptuous coldness as to stop any further attempt. I suppose she was mad. You will see now, my poor Elfrida, that this parentage is a much greater drawback than any poverty."

"It is indeed," said Elfrida with a shudder; for if there was one person in the world whom she really regarded with horror, it was that unfortunate woman.

"Yes, it is most terrible; but—but I must and will endeavour to find out more positively whether she is really dead, and question whoever was with her at the last; for I am more and more possessed with an idea—a suspicion—but still it would be so very improbable, that I had better not mention it, or lead you to hope. No, you must face the whole horror of the case, and if, on further acquaintance, his good qualities

really counterbalance the evil which he may possibly have inherited from his mother, why, then——”

“But what is your suspicion?—do tell me, for it has made me so miserable to think that he had such a mother; do—quick, I shall have no peace till I know!”

“It is this strange likeness to Lady Lillyford—but, stay, that may be accounted for by the impression produced on the unfortunate girl’s mind before the birth of her child, by the sight of that beautiful, happy bride. Yes, it is very possible, and hence proceeds her hatred of the boy. She may have been struck with it, and disliked him in consequence. No, I fear there can be no chance—we must face the evil; we must have no delusions; we must not look away from it.”

Both mother and daughter remained for some moments silent, while tears ran down Elfrida’s cheeks. But she dashed them away, as if ashamed to indulge in such bitter

grief, and exclaimed, as if with an effort to think of some pleasant subject, and with a tone of voice especially intended to cheer her mother,

“What a delightful old place Oakhampton Park must be! See, the sun is coming out, and lights up those beautiful dells and those herds of deer—look, just by the river that runs through its grounds. And to think that our pretty friend Beatrice is going to live there! Oh! how happy she will be, and how delightful for us to have her so near. What! you don’t think so?” she added, on seeing a doubtful expression on her mother’s face. “You think Lady Lillyford will not like us to be intimate, perhaps?”

“I am sure she will not, for many reasons. In the first place, she dislikes country neighbours, and then, you know very well; she was afraid her son——”

“Yes, I know,” said Elfrida, with an embarrassed air, which showed that in this

case her heart was quite untouched. "But that was two years ago, and he probably has seen many girls he likes much better."

"Very probably; but still I am convinced there will be no visits exchanged between us."

"And shall we never see Beatrice, then?"

"I fear not; and am sorry, for I think we were beginning to be of some little use to her at Sorrento."

CHAPTER IV.

The old Clergyman and his Sister.

“AND so I may never see the inside of that most interesting place,” said poor Elfrida, who thought to herself with a half smile that she had unfortunately fixed on a bad subject for distraction. But she had been taught never to indulge in despondency, to find good in everything, to cultivate a real taste for “whatsoever things are lovely.” So she was soon pleasantly absorbed in making a sketch from the window, transferring to paper the effect of the bright November sunshine gilding the brown woods, the church tower, and the few old gabled cottages, with their quaint old clipped yew-trees and trim gardens dotted about

here and there in the near view. There was no drive up to the door of the ancient house, only a paved walk from an old iron gate just opposite the porch. Along this walk Elfrida presently saw a lady and gentleman coming up to the house.

“Who can these be? I thought we should have no visitors,” said she to Mrs. Somerton, who was now absorbed in her writing at a table near. “Oh! I suppose it must be that good clergyman and his sister you have so often talked to me about?”

“Yes,” said Mrs Somerton, as she looked out of the window and saw the broad back of a capacious lady, “that must be Peggy Mordaunt, and her shawl put on as crooked as ever. I used to like everything about her, even to her crooked shawl and tumbling down hair.”

“Well, I never heard you tolerate ungraceful dress on anyone before.”

“No, but Peggy and her brother are exceptional people, and she used to show me

sunshine in many dark places, years ago. Go and open the door for them ; very likely Pepita does not hear the bell, or even know that she is expected to answer it."

There was a warm greeting between old friends, who had not met for more than fifteen years, and Mrs. Somerton said,

"I was more thankful at the notion of being in your neighbourhood, than even at the most unexpected blessing of this pretty home."

"And so little Elfrida has grown up into a beautiful young lady," said Peggy, as she placed her large, strong hands on the girl's shoulders, and held her at a convenient distance, while she examined her features with a searching scrutiny, which in anyone else might have savoured of impertinence.

"Yes, she is very beautiful," added Peggy after a pause; "more lovely even than you ever were, but she has your dark blue eyes, I am glad to see, and his speaking mouth ; yes, it has the same quiver of feeling—his

straight and sensitive looking nose—and she has suffered too,” continued Peggy, and her rough manner became suddenly subdued, as she kissed the girl’s brow with an expression of gentler sympathy than might have been expected from the large, jolly-looking woman. But before those capacious hands and searching eyes were withdrawn, a look of sadness for a moment overcast Peggy’s face, and she said, as if half to herself,

“She’s more like him—very like. Ah! well, we shall all meet again some happy day.”

She then turned towards Mrs. Somerton, who had been watching her looks with intense interest, and although she could not hear her words, she felt sure of their meaning.

“You think her like him, and I am glad of it,” said she as she took Peggy’s hand, and held, or rather embraced it between her own, with a little caressing movement peculiar to her, which some people called childish.

“You will see more and more how much she resembles him in every way.”

“And you will love her all the more,” she added after a pause, in which some struggle seemed to take place in her mind, for she well knew that Peggy had loved her husband in early youth. It had been Peggy Mordaunt’s only attachment, and Mrs. Somerton’s sensitive disposition and conscience often reproached and troubled her with the recollection that it was her own attractive loveliness which had won her husband’s heart before she had become acquainted with Peggy. She therefore always regarded her with more compassionate interest than perhaps was needed. For although disappointed in this, her sole attachment, Peggy’s life had been peculiarly happy. She was gifted with one of those rare, even tempers, which usually accompany a good digestion, strong muscular power, a well-balanced and, in some respects, powerful mind. In fact, she possessed by nature the

sunniness of disposition which the delicate and often suffering organisation of Mrs. Somerton had only attained by constant self-restraint and perseverance in cultivating a taste for the beautiful and good in all things.

But we are taking no notice of the good clergyman all this time, nor did the others for some moments, therefore he had full leisure to scan the group with his little grey eyes, as he stood near the window apparently looking at some manuscript on the table.

Mr. Mordaunt formed a complete contrast to his sister in appearance as well as disposition. But the result was that as they agreed perfectly on all important points, they invariably pulled together; and he often said that if he had not Peggy to help him in his ministry, he should have given up his profession long ago.

“When you have done looking at each other, and finished all your sentimentalisms, perhaps you will tell me, dear Mrs. Somer-

ton, whether you really wish to keep that crooked old gardener I wrote to you about. I've no time for more this morning, but as you are coming, of course, to dine with us, we shall have plenty of time to talk, and find out how far the last fifteen years has altered us in mind and looks."

"Yes," said Peggy, "that's just it. I can't stay a moment—only wanted to see whether you looked happy in this old room, and whether your foreign maid is able to make you at all comfortable; everything must be so strange to her."

"Yes, she is very much puzzled, but upon the whole seems pleased; and as to the cracked and morose old gardener, she seems to get on with him wonderfully well, for he told me he hated women."

"But you ought to know the origin of this moroseness," said Peggy, "before you decide against him. The poor man was engaged to marry that handsome girl who caused such sorrow at the old hall, and she

deceived him to the last. It was only about a week before the birth of her child that he discovered the truth. The same blow that well-nigh killed poor Lady Lillyford drove him mad, and he was for some years confined in a lunatic asylum."

Mrs. Somerton looked round anxiously, to see what impression this new horror had on her daughter, and seeing that Elfrida was deadly pale, she whispered aside to Peggy—

"Well, you shall tell me more by-and-by, when we are alone, and then I will ask you about that painful story, but not before her."

"What can this all mean?" said Peggy, as they walked away; "there is some mystery. I should not wonder, now, if that Edward Luscombe and Elfrida have gone and fallen in love with each other. How very dreadful!—what can come of it?"

"Perhaps some good, at least; evil dispositions are not necessarily inherited, and

the poor father suffered awfully for his sins, and died, I have every reason to hope, sincerely penitent. No one ever suffered more for that one fault as you well know."

"And to think that they still continue,—for I guess now plainly what that beautiful girl's trouble is. Well, I daresay she will die of consumption, as her father did. Well—just like life," said Peggy, whose jolly face and buoyant spirits told that at least her own experience of life had not been one of unmitigated gloom.

CHAPTER V.

*The People who are not to be visited by the
Great House.*

THERE are times in one's life when, possessed by some peculiarly dominating feeling or idea, all surrounding objects and persons are seen in such manner connected with it, that we begin to doubt our own identity; for the surrounding world seems as if made only for the purpose of ministering to our own predominating feeling.

Elfrida felt this a few days after their arrival at Oakhampton. Everybody she met, all surrounding objects, the old house she constantly saw from her window, were connected quite unexpectedly in some painful way with him to whom her heart had been

given. She found herself constantly speculating on those windows,—wondering whether one of them belonged to the room where the poor child had been burnt, where the beautiful young mother had breathed her last.

Then the morose old gardener, whose life seemed also to have been marred by that same woman, even the sight of him produced but another variation of the dominant idea—that the author of all this widespread mischief was *his* mother, the mother of Edward Luscombe! There was no escaping from the constant impression. The old gardener's miserable face; the wild, sometimes almost fiendish expression that gleamed in his eyes, and which she fancied he directed especially at her, was peculiarly distressing to her.

Even Peggy's jolly face would sometimes assume a look of anxiety, which she evidently tried to conceal when any allusion was made to the Lillyfords, or anything connected

with them. Even her avoidance of the subject brought it to Elfrida's mind.

She longed to know whether the present owners had arrived, and whether Beatrice would try to make any attempt to see her, as during that short interview after church in London she had so strongly resolved to do. But no one mentioned anything about the Park and its inmates to her, and she shrank from inquiry, because she dreaded the disappointment of hearing that they had arrived, and that Beatrice had not endeavoured to see her.

On the point, however, her doubts were soon set at rest, for Mrs. Somerton, divining her daughter's anxiety on all subjects connected with the family and place, informed her, as soon as she heard it herself, that Sir Charles and Lady Lillyford had arrived, but that Beatrice was remaining for some time with her grandmother in Wimpole Street.

"I think it probable," said Mrs. Somer-

ton, "that she finds Mrs. Dronington a much more companionable person than her mother: in fact, she is a better type of woman than is often to be met with in these transition days."

"Is she?" said Elfrida with surprise; "then how is it that her daughter is so—I mean not exactly satisfactory."

"Ah! I see you have trained her well," said Peggy, who joined them at this moment, for they were walking through the village on their way to the vicarage. "I saw she was just going to abuse, or at least to find fault with somebody, and I well remember your old trick of never allowing such a thing. And that makes people call you so *fade* and common-place. Not only will you never abuse others yourself, but you look so reproachfully when absent people are being perhaps somewhat sharply commented on, that you spoil all the pleasure of gossip."

"And much pleasure you would have, dear Peggy. You know you were the first

person to show me the real harm of uncharitable-mindedness, as you called it."

"Yes, but you so soon outstripped me in all my wise precepts, and became so very good, that I began to regret my preachings. Well, who was the person Elfrida was making the best of? Ah! I suspect it was Lady Lillyford; by-the-by, I am so glad to hear that good old Mrs. Dronington is going to bring the girl here next month. I shall be very glad to see the old lady, but I doubt whether she will influence any of them at all. She has sufficient common sense and good feeling to act well herself, but scarcely power or cleverness enough to influence others. Yet she is a very estimable and right-judging person, and could give a sounder opinion on most points than many people could who have twice as much talent or cleverness."

"Yes," said Mrs. Somerton, "that is very true; but I fear Beatrice will not find her a very cheering companion, because she is

totally wanting in the faculty to enjoy or understand fun ; she is entirely matter-of-fact, and hence in some degree arises her inability to influence others."

"Still she is a great improvement upon her daughter, and much better than most people Beatrice would have met abroad, I should think," said Peggy, who, with all her charitable-mindedness, was not quite without prejudices against foreigners.

"Whose house is that we can just see in the far distance to the left—there, in a line just over those poplars and the bridge? we can only see it when the evening sun lights up that part of the landscape. "

"That is Ferncote Hall—a very beautiful old place," said Peggy: "It has lately been inherited from the old Mr. Fairleigh by a distant relation. I happened to know about him, as he is a great friend of my brother's old pupil, Mr. Sterndale. They have been travelling together in the East, and Mr. Sterndale has repeatedly mentioned him

in his letters, and expressed his hopes that we shall know him when he comes to England. His name was—let me see—yes, Brookfield—that's it; and now his sisters and himself have taken the name of Fairleigh. In Mr. Sterndale's last letter, which was written from Styria, he said that he was staying with your relation, Count Hohenstein, and that Mr. Fairleigh, who was then at Venice, had been invited to join him there by-and-by.

“Hohenstein,” said Mrs. Somerton; “ah! that is near the college where Edward Luscombe is, as you know. Perhaps Mr. Sterndale may fall in with him; if so, pray tell me what he thinks of the young man.”

Peggy's honest face clouded over, and she looked as if she already knew more than she liked to say. But she only shook her head, and muttered that for her part she thought people knew their own business best, and that it is no use asking too many opinions.

“But I must ascertain how the case really stands between Miss Somerton and Edward Luscombe,” was her next thought, “otherwise I shall certainly be making blunders.”

At that moment they reached the Vicarage, where Mrs. Somerton and her daughter had promised to spend the evening; and the result of Peggy's private inquiries that night was the information that—but perhaps we had better give it in Mrs. Somerton's own words.

“We met him,” she said, “for the first time last spring, in Italy, where he came for a little rest, having been reading rather too hard. As he knew my relations at Hohenstein—one of the nephews being at the same college—we speedily became intimate, and I saw that my daughter and he were evidently taken with each other. He spoke to me about her, and asked if he might be permitted to hope. I said that both were so very young, there must be no engagement

at present, but that after a year had passed, if he were still in the same mind, he might write to Elfrida. I have heard nothing about him for some time, and therefore I should be obliged if you will tell me anything you may hear."

At that moment Mr. Mordaunt and Elfrida joined them, and nothing more was said on the subject so interesting to them both.

But Elfrida, with the quick perception which affection gives, had felt that Mr. Mordaunt, and perhaps his sister, knew more about Edward or his mother, or some dreadful mystery connected with him, than they had told even to Mrs. Somerton; because Mr. Mordaunt's countenance had that evening been strangely compassionate when he looked at her, and he had endeavoured more than they did, to start other subjects of conversation or interest.

Elfrida mentioned this to her mother after they had gone home, but Mrs. Somer-

ton attributed it to the constitutional shyness which deprived him of tact, and would be sure to make him do, say, or look the wrong thing, wherever a painful or disagreeable subject was named, or purposely avoided.

“But why should it be avoided? Why not speak of Mr. Luscombe before me, unless——”

“Unless there is something to be concealed, you mean? Not exactly. But they know he has his fortune to make—that you could not possibly marry until his profession enables him to live with some degree of independence, and——”

“And his mother. Yes, I know it must be a painful subject, very; but still I wish you could ascertain from Mr. Mordaunt whether he does not think there is something worse—something that neither you nor his sister are aware of. Do pray try to ask him this.”

Mrs. Somerton promised, but was not able to discover; for with all his shyness

Mr. Mordaunt had sufficient determination, and when he thought it right to conceal anything, no power could extract it from him. Elfrida was right. Mr. Mordaunt had an additional subject for dread on her account. Various reports had reached him concerning his ward, all tending the same way, and these reports were to the effect that Edward Luscombe was likely to be captivated by a beautiful girl, a niece of the Count von Hohenstein, who possessed no inconsiderable dowry of her own, and was known to have expressed a decided preference for Englishmen. The better to explain these reports, we must follow Edward Luscombe into Germany.

CHAPTER VI.

Fascination.

NOT far from the celebrated caves of Adelsberg may still be seen one of those ancient castles that remind the traveler of days and customs long passed away.

Hohenstein is, or was some twenty years ago, inhabited by the then representative of the ancient family whose name it bears. The Graf von Hohenstein had an only child, a young girl who lately had come from the convent school at Udine where she had been educated. Her mother was a Venetian of the noble family of Rossi, and had died the year before, just after Dorina had been betrothed to her cousin's son, Count Rossi. It had

been the mother's devout wish that this marriage should take place, but as her health ever since the birth of her child had been delicate, she scarcely expected to live long enough to witness the ceremony.

The young couple were in consequence betrothed a year before Dorina left the convent, but now, as she had attained her seventeenth year, the marriage was to take place at Hohenstein with great splendour.

The late Graf's mother was English—Mrs. Somerton's half sister—the Countess Bianchi mentioned in a former chapter—and during a year the Somertons passed in Friuli, they became very intimate with the young heiress, and also with her cousin, Cunigunda von Hohenstein, who was brought up at the same convent. The latter was also the only child of the Graf's younger brother, was consequently next heiress to the possessions of that family, and had besides a pretty fortune of her own. She was more than a year older than Dorina, but her parents had arranged

that she should remain in the convent until Dorina's education should be finished. The brilliant and beautiful Cunigunda was by no means so fond of the convent or its inmates as her more gentle and loving cousin, and the extra year of bondage, as she called it, annoyed her so much that she gave vent to her spleen by many practical jokes, to the great scandal of the good nuns and dismay of her confessor.

Few women liked Cunigunda except Dorina, who always endeavoured to screen her wild and mischievous cousin from disgrace. But she hoped that now they had left the convent and were established in her father's castle, her cousin would behave in a manner much better and more suitable to a young lady of high birth.

Dorina had inherited her mother's delicate constitution, and although her form and features were lovely, yet her paleness formed a contrast to her brilliant cousin.

Edward Luscombe had been sent abroad

to be educated by the express wish of his father. Old Sir Edward Lillyford desired to banish as far as he could from his sight the son whose birth had caused such misery, and sent him to the University of G * * *, where he became acquainted with some of the family of Hohenstein, and afterwards with the Graf himself, who took a great fancy to the young Englishman and invited him to the Castle.

When Edward Luscombe arrived at the Castle and was first introduced to the two cousins, he was startled at the beauty of Cunigunda—she seemed to him the embodiment of some strange dream. Hitherto Elfri-da had been his ideal of loveliness and charm, and perhaps the extreme contrast of Cunigunda's style of beauty made him less on his guard. For although he thought and said that nothing could be more perfect than her dazzling beauty, and that she had every quality of perfect gracefulness except repose, yet this very deficiency induced him to be-

lieve that it was impossible he could ever fall in love with her.

And it is most probable that such a result would have been impossible, had not the young lady herself determined it should be otherwise. Cunigunda's greatest amusement, in fact passion, was to make conquests; but probably the penniless young student (although she decided he was the handsomest man she had ever seen) might have been spared had she not found he was in love, in fact engaged, she believed, to that "cold, proper English girl," Miss Somerton, to whom she had taken a great dislike at first sight; which dislike had increased to hatred when she saw that Dorina also loved the English cousin even more than herself. Perhaps too she instinctively felt that Elfrida was much more deserving of it.

This determination, however, of Cunigunda's was merely a little episode in the grand business of her life, a sort of by-play

to try her hand as it were ; for the object of her ambition was to captivate Count Rossi before the ceremony should take place ; to make him give up the heiress and propose to herself.

Edward Luscombe soon began to suspect the desperate game the dazzling creature was playing, but he discarded the idea as something too dreadful, for Count Rossi was evidently deeply attached to his gentle *fiancée* ; and her changing colour—the joy that seemed to tremble in her eyes whenever he addressed her—gave full evidence of her love for him.

There was a large party staying at the Castle, and though Edward did not remain there during the entire six weeks while the *fêtes* lasted, yet he came to and fro, and passed all the Sundays there. One or two English people were also staying there, and it so happened that one of them was the old friend and pupil of Mr. Mordaunt's, John Sterndale, already mentioned. Hence

the reports which reached Mr. Mordaunt of Edward Luscombe's attentions to Cunigunda became of course exaggerated, as such things always do by transmission from one person to another. For Edward watched the splendid Cunigunda perhaps all the more from his vague suspicion of her designs on the Count, and in fact he endeavoured to attract her attention away from them, and thus allow the *fiancées* more liberty to talk or dance together.

The *chasse* in the morning was generally succeeded by dancing in the evening, and these dances ended with a *polonaise*, in which guests of all ages joined, and paraded the long suites of rooms, up and down stairs, and into the old gallery, which extended all over the upper story. Sometimes these were headed by the young *fiancées*, but more often by Cunigunda and some grandee, and where this was the case, she was sure to lead the procession into all kinds of out-of-the-way and unexpected places.

One night she led them down a remote turret stairs into a place which had formerly been a prison under the Castle, which she had secretly contrived to make the good seneschal illuminate with brilliant-coloured lamps. Then, to the surprise of even the Graf himself, who had forgotten the existence of this entrance into the caves, Cunigunda tapped with a theatrically mysterious air at a small door at the further end, and beckoning to those behind, she bade them follow her into what she laughingly called an enchanted palace. It was at once opened, but the doorway was so small and low, that only one person could enter by stooping.

An exclamation of wonder and delight was heard from the numerous guests who followed Cunigunda and her partner. It really looked like a scene of enchantment, for a portion of the celebrated Adelsberg caves, with their brilliant stalactites, was disclosed to the view of the guests, illuminated with many torches, held up by

people at intervals, who had been stationed there.

The old Graf was so pleased, that he determined to give a regular ball to all the neighbourhood in the caves, and said he would light them with coloured lamps, and put down a temporary floor to dance upon.

About a week before the day fixed for the wedding, there was a fresh arrival of guests, and amongst them was Mr. Stern-dale's friend, Arthur Brookfield, mentioned by Miss Mordaunt, and who, moreover, has been also described by Lady Lillyford as having been an admirer of her daughter's at Rome. He had now taken the name of Fairleigh, and inherited the place near Oakhampton where his sisters were living, unvisited by Lady Lillyford.

CHAPTER VII.

Will the Syren Succeed?

LADY LILLYFORD's surmises about Arthur Brookfield had been right. Mr. Brookfield had not only fallen in love with Beatrice, but had fully intended to propose at the last ball, where they met, and was only diverted from his intention by a sudden misgiving that she did not really care for him, and was, in fact, incapable of any strong attachment. He had watched her as she waltzed with others, and saw the same smile, the same joyous expression on her face as when he spoke to her. It is most probable, however, that he would have proposed, had not the death of old Sir Edward rendered the return of the

Lillyfords to England necessary. Yet he had by no means endeavoured to discard the pleasant image of Beatrice from his heart. He looked forward to a renewal of their intimacy, and on mature reflection attributed her apparent indifference to the undeveloped state of her mind.

A few months afterwards the distant relation from whom he inherited a considerable property, died. This inheritance more than doubled his income, which before amounted to four or five thousand a year. It was totally unexpected, and the principal effect produced on his mind was a great increase of responsibility.

Even before this, one of the motives which made him hesitate to encourage himself in his attachment for Beatrice, had been a fear that she would scarcely be able to fulfil his requirements as the mistress of a large country place. He was essentially one of a class who, I fear, are fast dying out—the real old English country gentleman. His

great object was to revive in the immediate neighbourhood the real spirit of country hospitality which railways are fast eradicating from most parts of England.

He was now travelling homewards with his friend, Mr. Sterndale, and as his sisters were already established at the place he had lately inherited, he was looking forward with a nervous anxiety to have news of his beautiful Beatrice from them. He had a high opinion of his eldest sister's judgment, and since he arrived at Venice his letters were filled with questions about their neighbours at Oakhampton, which questions, as we have seen, were not likely to be answered in any way, for Lady Lillyford objected to call on her country neighbours. She, of course, was utterly ignorant of the Miss Fairleighs having anything to do with the Mr. Brookfield whose unfulfilled proposal she still bitterly deplored ; and, moreover, she took into her head that the present owner of Ferncote was an old man.

In the meantime Arthur Fairleigh's constancy was destined to be put to a most severe trial at Hohenstein, for no sooner had Cunigunda heard of the riches of the good-looking young Englishman—whose fortune had been enormously exaggerated—than she put forth all her arts to win his heart. With a penetration worthy of a better nature she divined the chief characteristics of his disposition, and adapted herself to them in such a manner as to call forth Dorina's wonder and delight, who thought her cousin was really grown wise and humble.

To a looker-on it was a curious sight to see the game she was playing with these three men of opposite characters and positions, and the only person who was fully aware of her intrigues was Mr. Mordaunt's correspondent, Mr. Sterndale; for the "Armida"-like enchantress contrived to blind Dorina's father as well as herself, and most of the other people there.

Two evenings before that on which the

great ball was to take place in the cave, Mr. Sterndale and Edward Luscombe happened to be standing near each other watching the dancers in the saloon.

“I do not think she will remain long in this world,” said Mr. Sterndale to Edward, looking towards Dorina, who had just returned to the seat opposite, after dancing with her intended. “And yet she might live, and be happy too, if——”

“You mean, if she felt as sure of the man she is engaged to, Count Rossi, as she is of herself?” said Edward Luscombe.

“Well, now you put it into my head, I am not sure that you’re far from the mark.”

“It seems like it, yet she ought to be sure, for he keeps following her about the room with his eyes, and scowling at every man who speaks to her, like the *primo amoroso* of an opera; but the real fact I take to be this,—and it’s rather a curious study of human nature, in these days when ‘an undoubting Cobbett-like manner,’ as Coleridge

has it in his 'Table-Talk,' is the normal manner of the generation,—she can't understand being preferred to her conspicuous cousin Cunigunda ; she isn't jealous of her, she is too thoroughly good for that, but—(how shall I express it ?)—she estimates the attractions of the conspicuous cousin so much above her own, and her own, therefore, seem to her so small by comparison, that she cannot quite believe they are up to the task of holding Count Rossi's affections together."

"If the said affections cannot be held together by her, when she has once got hold of them," said Edward Luscombe,—"*they must be, they really must be*——the epithet is too big for the paltry trammels of a part of speech that has a local habitation and a name in grammars and dictionaries."

"I evolve from my inner consciousness," said Mr. Sterndale, smiling, "that the man must be a fool of the weakest type who, having once fallen in love with her, could

be drawn away by the magnetism of the conspicuous cousin's self-asserting beauty."

"The conspicuous cousin is wonderfully attractive, though," said Edward, reflecting half aloud.

"They are all infatuated about her," said Mr. Sterndale, "from Dorina downwards. It provokes me more than I can describe to see a whole set of people led away by an evil genius."

"Do you really think her so bad? Surely the love of being admired, where the charms are so very great, is rather excusable."

"I fear you are one of the infatuated," said Mr. Sterndale, severely. "I almost despaired of you last week, but now that fine rich countryman of yours has arrived, I fancy she will leave you alone."

Edward laughed, and looked as if he scarcely knew whether to take Mr. Sterndale's words literally or not.

The latter continued, "Ha! I verily believe the enchantress has divined what I was

saying, for here she comes with her best smiles."

Certainly there seemed to be something almost magical in Cunigunda's dazzling beauty. She was dressed in a kind of silvery tissue, which formed a brilliant contrast to her jet-black hair and star-like eyes. A wreath of white water-lilies crowned her head, and drooping down her shoulders, was interwoven with the tresses of her black hair. She came towards them with downcast looks, her long black eyelashes resting on a cheek delicately tinted with pale pink.

"Look," said Edward, "her eyes are generally downcast until she speaks, and then the sudden flash with which they open and, as it were, fix the beholder, is as startling as an electric shock. She is a person who makes most people feel her presence, whether they will or not. There is no escaping that spell. But see, she is not coming here after all; that lady has asked her

some question, or told her something which has annoyed her—she looks anything but pleased. There, she is going off to the Graf; she has some plan in her head, I warrant you.”

“I feel,” said Mr. Sterndale, “as if I were looking at some awful conflagration, yet cannot turn away my eyes from watching her. And sometimes, when I have succeeded in so doing, I have felt her glances on my face smiting like the blast from a furnace, and her voice or words continue to vibrate in my ear long after she has ceased to speak. The fact is, she is a creature of stronger vitality than I ever saw before, and she is likely to carry her point as soon as she has fully made up her mind what she wishes most. At the present moment she is thinking it would be delightful to marry Count Rossi, and take possession of this castle and estates as well; but there is something considerably attractive to her also in the Englishman—my poor friend Arthur

Fairleigh—and his fine country place. She would like to marry both, if possible—at all events, to enchain them both permanently. Depend upon it, some catastrophe will take place before we are many days older.”

“And you think she really cares for neither?”

“Not so; she loves Count Rossi better than she does or probably ever will love anyone else. But now, watch her while she is talking to Fairleigh. I think this evening she is determined he shall propose. Poor fellow, how I pity him! for his *beau-ideal* of happiness is to have a real good domestic wife, and live happily at his country place ever afterwards. Fancy that brilliant mermaid giving out flannels at Christmas to the poor cottagers, or inspecting the village school. If he marries her he will do exactly the contrary to what he had intended. I suppose some day I shall do something equally foolish. Yet I thought he was so safe—that pretty girl he was al-

ways talking of! By-the-by, she will be his neighbour now in ——shire. Ferncote is very near the Lillyfords.”

Edward started at the name, so much so, that Mr Sterndale was surprised, and inquired whether he knew that part of the country.

“Yes—no—but it—there is no use in making any concealment, it (Oakhampton) was my father’s place. I thought you might have heard the story—it is a very painful one,” said Edward; “so painful, that I often wonder how it is I can be the joyous creature I am. Though I never knew either of my parents, and I believe was hated by both, I have been blessed with a temperament so happy, so equably joyous, that, except for one single evening, I never have known what sadness is. I have my way to work in life, but the path seems so easy.”

“Not easy if you fall under the influence of the mermaid’s marvellous fascinations,”

said Mr. Sterndale, as he looked towards Cunigunda, and then regarded the young man with looks in which compassion, warning, and sternness were strangely blended. "I thought, some little time ago, there would be no escape for you. Nay, do not look so indignant; remember that the wisest men are not always proof against such a syren as that."

"Syren! Yes, there is just enough of the woman in her to serve as a cloak for qualities which, if seen as they really are, would break the spell of her fascination."

"The passions, but not the heart of a woman, eh? Now, why don't you go and dance? What a lounging lot you men of this generation are! But perhaps your thoughts are elsewhere," added Mr. Sterndale, with a keen glance into the young man's eyes. "Well, never mind, I will not allude to a feeling which I now see for the first time exists, and with you is a sacred subject; but I rejoice in the discovery that you have some

attachment that is hallowed in your eyes, and consequently the subject of it must be worthy. There, now, you must go, they want to get up the *polonaise*."

CHAPTER VIII.

Arrival at Oakhampton.

WE will now leave the inmates of the Schloss Hohenstein to enjoy their festivities, and return to the place whither many thoughts and letters were directed by some of the guests. Beatrice had arrived at Oakhampton with her grandmother, and she was fortunately predisposed to look at the old place from a favourable point of view, thanks to Mrs. Dronington's description, or rather to the impression of it which the old lady's natural good feeling and taste had prompted her to make. This somewhat counteracted the lugubrious accounts forwarded by Lady Lillyford in her letters.

Sir Charles was absent on some country

business when they arrived ; they found Lady Lillyford in a sort of sulky loneliness, lying on a sofa at the farther end of the long drawing-room, and a pile of the newest and best (or worst) French novels, intermingled with red and green volumes from Mudie's, lay beside her on a table.

“ Well, I'm glad you've come at last. I had really got so nervous at being in this dreadful place all by myself, that I am quite ill.”

“ What a beautiful room !” said Beatrice, who was so lost in astonishment at a style of room she had never before seen, that she could scarcely attend to her mother's complaints.

It was one of those large yet most comfortable, as well as picturesque, old rooms that can only belong to English country houses of the olden time—full of nooks and corners, and large bay and small oriel windows, where the remains of painted glass were still to be seen. The walls were partly

cövered with tapestry and some good pictures. Chinese and inlaid and Pietra-dura cabinets, with antique vases and statuettes, brought light into its quaint corners.

“And what a view!” exclaimed the delighted girl, as she ran into the deep recess of the south bay, and looked over the beautiful park and its oak woods.

“Yes, it’s all very well, just now by daylight; but the dark passages, and that dreadful room where the child was murdered—and I really begin to believe in ghosts. I’m sure I heard the cry of a child as I passed near the door of that room; twice I heard it, and nothing would induce me to go into it. Nothing! I really believe it’s a judgment on me for having so often said I didn’t believe in ghosts; and Florentine declares she saw a dreadful looking ghost, an old woman with fierce eyes, come out from that room; and she was so frightened that she let my arrowroot fall, and the light, and then tumbled down the steps herself in try-

ing to run away. I heard her screams, and so did the French cook, and he rushed out in his nightcap,—you know he goes to bed so early; and she was picked up, and I gave her some salvolatile, and they all searched about to see if it was a trick, but no old woman with fierce eyes could be found, so it must be a ghost. Nothing will induce Florentine to go about by herself now after dark, and Donati is obliged to sit up and escort her from my room to her own every night. It is quite dreadful!”

“I don’t believe in ghosts either,” said Mrs. Dronington; “you may be sure it was fancy.”

“Well, you had better go and stand at the door of the dreadful room yourself at midnight, and try to ascertain whether any mischievous person can have played a trick.”

“Do, and let me go there with you,” said Beatrice, with a half pleased, half frightened look. For there is a mixture of pleasure with the dread which youth and health often

feel at the idea of supernatural appearances.

Yet there was more of dread than pleasure in the feeling she experienced as, five minutes afterwards, she passed by the door of that room where she had heard such an awful catastrophe had taken place.

“And that is the room where poor Lady Lillyford died,” said Lady Lillyford, pointing with her finger to a door as they passed along the corridor towards the apartments which had been prepared for them. “I have never ventured into that since the first day I came, for there is such a look of sadness about it;—besides, it must be haunted too, for the gardener and several of the stable people say that lights are seen in it from the outside. They could see it quite plain, and the coat of arms, with the red shield looking like a big drop of blood, on the pane. Old Thomas told me so himself, and the other room where the poor child was burnt looks as if it was all in flames.”

Beatrice shuddered, although she tried to laugh, and drew closer to her grandmother.

“What does Roland think of all this?” inquired Mrs. Dronington of her daughter when they had reached the room prepared for her. “I sometimes fancy that it might be good for him if he could believe in ghosts, or anything supernatural. I am afraid he has no religion, and I heard him say one day that he thought people had no souls.”

Lady Lillyford was half puzzled to think how the belief in ghosts could help anyone to give credence to Revelation; but she was too indolent and dull to put her thoughts into words, so she sat down in the easy chair before her mother’s fire and said,

“I almost wish I had fixed on this room for myself; it looks quite cheerful now, I fancy.”

“It is a delightful room,” said Mrs. Dronington; “I remember it well; and there is the same beautiful Pietra-dura cabinet, with the little man pointing to a large but-

terfly as big as himself. How glad I am to see it again—what a number of pleasant scenes the sight of it recalls; and there is the same smell, some old perfume in the drawers. How often I have admired the polished oak floor, and carved ceiling too; and the figures on each side of that chimney-piece, and the portrait of poor Sir Edward's grandfather over it. How like old Sir Edward it is, poor man; there is the same look of pain, a troubled expression on the forehead. They said that he also did something very wrong, and was never happy afterwards."

"What a fine old picture," said Beatrice; "how I wish gentlemen would wear such a picturesque dress as that,—the embroidered waistcoat and point-lace ruff."

"That was just what I did not like in this room," said Lady Lillyford; "I thought that old gentleman's face looked so melancholy, and his sad eyes seemed to follow one about—I felt they would look at me

in bed and before I got up in the morning ; but still these white and blue wainscoted walls are cheerful, and the large bay window is very sunny by day. Yes, I think I like it better than mine—I have got so tired of the Chinese paper on the walls of mine ; but then, it is farther from the west wing, where the dreadful haunted rooms are. Now, from your door you can actually see the door of Lady Lillyford's room, and the other state room, and the dreadful one is not far beyond."

"And where is mine?" asked Beatrice. "Oh ! I see—yes, it opens into this. Oh ! how very delightful !—I shall feel so safe being near granny ; and you will let me sleep with the door open, won't you ?"

Mrs. Dronington thought it necessary to look grave at her grand-daughter's foolish fears ; and yet when the idea for the first time in her long life struck her of the use supernatural appearances might have, her gravity soon relaxed, and she became ab-

sorbed in old recollections; for that next room had been inhabited by a favourite sister during one happy winter, and she had died the following year.

Beatrice was rather like this pretty young sister, and as the thought struck her she kissed her grandchild with more than usual spontaneity; then, as if in excuse to herself for this unusual demonstrativeness, she said,

“You put me in mind so sometimes of my dear sister Nelly; and she slept in this room during my last visit here thirty-four—no, let me see, thirty-six years ago.”

“Dear Aunt Nelly!—I remember her,” said Lady Lillyford, with a look of more interest than her inexpressive features usually wore. “She was a dear good creature, and I remember she gave me such a pretty new frock.”

“Yes, that she was,” said Mrs. Dronington, with a sigh; and then it came across her that if she could have been more like that good, clever, and interesting sister

Nelly, her own daughter might have become a very different and very superior person.

“Nelly could always manage other people, and well too,” thought Mrs. Dronington; “no one could resist her winning ways; and it was always for their good. Many a time I have seen her take the glass of port away from my father’s lips, when he was ordered not to drink more than four after he had the gout so badly; and if any one but Nell had dared to say a word, much less take the glass out of his hand, he would almost have knocked them down for their pains.”

“And so Roland is coming soon, and will bring some of his roistering friends down, will he?” continued Mrs. Dronington, after a pause, during which she was thinking again that there was no one to influence that wild youth in the way her sister Nell might possibly have influenced him, had she lived; and she was painfully conscious how inferior she was to that loved sister, and

could not help marvelling at the mysterious dispensation which had deprived the world of one so good and useful as Nelly, and left behind one so commonplace and stupid as herself.

“ Yes, I have got the Skeffingtons coming to meet him from ——shire, and the Nolans and Gubbings.”

“ Are not you going to have any of the neighbours hereabouts ?”

“ Oh ! no ; nobody can really stand meeting neighbours, they are always so very stupid. Lady Horatia Nolan begged I would not ask them, for she never would go to a country house if neighbours were asked. She has found it so inconvenient when she gives parties in London ; they were often so impertinent, and expected her to remember them. So I promised faithfully that she should not meet any. She will remain here all the time Roland is with us, and she is so lively, I hope we may revive a little then.”

“And those Gubbings, too—are they coming? Why, surely you could find much nicer people within a few miles—daughters of people of the real old families. Now the Gubbings are really nobodies. I can’t think how you came to be so intimate with them.”

“It was at Carlsbad, and the Baroness and Count Ichsgoff were so fond of them; and the girls are very clever, and act beautifully; they are really very useful in a country-house. Lady Horatia told me she wanted to bring them.”

“But it will be such a slight towards the county to find that they are all left out, if you are going to have theatricals, and things of that kind,” said Mrs. Dronington, with a pained look.

“But I can’t help it. I promised Lady Horatia, and I shall keep my word.”

CHAPTER IX.

*Beatrice enjoys the old English Place and
Country Life.*

IN spite of her dread of ghosts, and mysterious sights and sounds, Beatrice found herself daily more and more pleased with the old place. To English people who have lived all their lives abroad, the impression produced by a good specimen of an old country place is very striking, either for good or ill, unless they have (like the silly, frivolous Lady Lillyford) acquired the worst spirit of roving and unsettled habits, grafted upon English prejudices.

The charm of repose, the peaceful look of stately groves and herds of graceful browsing deer, the neat and happy-looking

cottages, with their trim gardens, quaintly-clipped hedges, and bee-hives, form a most charming contrast to the glaring sights and sounds of foreign towns, and their filthy suburbs. For it is very seldom that English travellers, or even residents abroad, are admitted into the real country castles or villas of the natives. Therefore English country-houses have, in this case, all the charm of complete novelty added to their own intrinsic merits. The natural good taste and good feeling of Beatrice enabled her most fully to enjoy Oakhampton Hall, its fine park and pretty village.

The respectful curtseys of the village children, and bows of the country men, who still venerated with old-fashioned fervour the possessor of the old estates, the (to them) Lords and Ladies of the Hall, was extremely gratifying to her, and tended to make her feel as if her presence there was of some use, or rather made some difference to these simple people. It was the first

time strange children had done this to her alone, and the feeling of gratified importance it produced recalled more and more vividly to her mind Arthur Brookfield's conversation.

He had often talked to her of his old country place in ——shire, and she now remembered with extreme pain that she had sometimes felt rather bored, and that he must have seen it.

“And that may have been the reason why he never——”

And at that unfinished thought tears started to her eyes. For the comparative repose of her life since quitting Italy had not only tended to develop many qualities hitherto crushed and kept back by hurry, constant gaiety, and never-ceasing change, but greatly increased her affection for those persons who had hitherto impressed her most, by allowing her thoughts time to dwell upon them.

Foremost among these were the Somer-

tons and Arthur Brookfield. The name of the latter was not pronounced in her thoughts, though—perhaps, because his image was becoming more deeply impressed on her heart; so much so, that even his name could scarcely be thought of without producing a tell-tale blush on her pretty cheeks. She never mentioned his name, and her mother, having another plan in her head, connected with her dear friend Lady Horatia Nolan's only son, soon forgot the annoyance she had felt and moaned over, at what she had called "that good match having been so provokingly broken off before it came to a proposal."

It will be seen, therefore, that Beatrice enjoyed the place thoroughly, but—there must always be a but—beside her daily increasing regret that she had shown herself so stupidly insensible to Arthur Brookfield's evident partiality, the great present drawback to her happiness in Oakhampton was her mother's persevering refusal to allow her

to have any intercourse with the Somertons.

The strange obstinacy of weak and silly persons is sometimes very perplexing to beholders, who wonder how it is they contrive to carry some such foolish point as this, against the better judgment and more right feeling of all those with whom they live. Perhaps, however, Mrs. Dronington's arguments might in time have produced some effect, had not Mrs. Somerton herself begged her not to interfere in the matter ; for of course Mrs. Dronington called on the Somertons the very day after her arrival. Mrs. Somerton did not wish to be the cause of any "family unpleasantness," as Mrs. Dronington would have called it, and begged that she would not do so again.

Beatrice had hoped, before she arrived at Oakhampton, that she would at least see the sunny and cheering faces of the Somertons in church, but she found that they did not go to the same. She had not been aware that there was a beautiful little old church

within the Park gates, and only about a few minutes' walk from the Hall, in which the family always attended the service. Whereas the Somertons, and most of the people from the cottages near, went to the larger church with the square old Norman tower, that stood on a little mound in the midst of the village. So consequently they had no chance of meeting there, and as Lady Lillyford persistently forbade her daughter to go to the village school, or enter any of the cottages, she was deprived of all prospect of ever seeing her friend.

The following week the expected guests arrived, and with them Sir Charles Lillyford and Roland, the eldest son.

Beatrice had not seen her brother for nearly a year, and various rumours had reached her ears which gave her great pain. Her anxiety on his account seemed to have increased since her arrival at Oakhampton. in a manner that both startled and perplexed herself. Her grandmother sometimes

hinted that Roland's reckless extravagance was such as to render it very doubtful whether their fortune could stand it, and that they never would be able to keep up the old place if he went on in such a thoughtless way. These gloomy forebodings she repeated again on the afternoon of the day that the guests were expected, while Beatrice and she were sitting at one end of the long gallery.

"And Sir Charles is too indulgent by far," said the old lady, shaking her head sadly, and muttering half to herself, "They are all going to ruin, and not a grain of sense have any one of them to keep them straight. Never mind, child, what I'm saying, for I will not teach you to look down on your parents, whatever I do. Only try to do the best you can yourself, and don't lean back in your chair. In my days no young girls were ever allowed to lean back, and perhaps if I had been more strict with your mother—but people began to say

that backboards were foolish, and that there was no use in stocks, so I let her run about wild ; then she became ungraceful and slouching, and got to look pert and contemptuous, and I do believe that these things, and such-like trifles, the sort of arrogant self-indulgence they foster, do really spoil the character. The independence of modern young ladies is such that they seem to tell one by their cocked-up hats, and noses high in the air, that they need no sympathy, and one feels one can be of no use to them."

"Then, grandmamma, that is, I suppose, why I like old people so much better, because one feels of some use to them. It is not, I think, merely *because* they are old, but they are generally so much kinder, and do not say rude and sharp things, as young ladies do, and then look as if they thought they had said something very clever. But Elfrida Somerton never did so ; she is as pleasant to talk to as any old lady."

“Yes, my dear, but I think the reason why you find old people more agreeable is that they happen to have been brought up many years ago, and the habits of those days did not tend to make young girls so independent as they are now. It seems to me that now they are ready-made married women. I am certain it’s all their bringing up. They are not taught to respect or obey anything or anybody—not even their clergyman, or their religion, or their parents. I am very much pleased to see, dear Beatrice, that you turn your toes out well, and that you don’t look as if you thought yourself so much better and wiser than an old stupid woman like me.”

“Indeed I don’t, dear granny; how could I, when I am so inferior to you?” said Beatrice, as she kissed the old lady’s forehead with loving reverence.

CHAPTER X.

Lady Horatia and her Satellites.

THE first entrance of Roland Lillyford, as he walked into the drawing-room with Lady Horatia Nolan on his arm, did not tend to dispel the apprehensions of his sister. There was, she thought, a kind of contemptuous swagger in his air that she had never observed so strongly before. Her father followed with another lady, and she thought he looked anxious and careworn. He had been obliged to go to London on business connected with his son's affairs the day Beatrice arrived, and therefore this was the first time she saw him at Oakhampton. She had never seen such a look of care before, for Sir Charles Lilly-

ford was one of those easy-going men who generally take the vicissitudes of life with a good humour which proceeds partly from a want of deep feeling, and partly from a small every-day philosophy which enables some circumscribed intellects to arrive at juster conclusions than those of a larger grasp and a greater power. As long as he was sure of a good dinner, and that nobody belonging to him grumbled or looked very unhappy, he was generally cheerful, even when they had been poor.

The long drawing-room where the guests had assembled was looking at its best, the afternoon sun shone upon the tapestry and pictures, and gilded the old marqueterie cabinets with its brilliant rays.

“Well, you really have a nice place,” said Lady Horatia; “but from your son’s description of it, I thought it had been so gloomy! The view would be charming if you were to cut down a few of those great trees; and the room would really be im-

mensely improved if you took away that dingy old tapestry, and had some nice lively paper, or some panelling with gilt mouldings. Would it not be a great improvement, Mrs. Dronington?" she added, turning towards her, and pronouncing the "Dro" very long and plain.

Now if there was a thing that irritated Mrs. Dronington more than another, it was to hear her name mispronounced. From what she had heard of Lady Horatia, she never expected to like her; nor were her prejudices otherwise than confirmed by the rough, flippant manner, and equally flippant remarks, which forced themselves on her attention; but a false quantity in the pronunciation of her own name was too much. We all have our weak points, and Mrs. Dronington's weak point had been hustled against. She took up the knitting that she had just put down, fixed her eyes bluffly on the knitting-needles, and replied,

"My name is Dronington, not *Dro*-ning-

ton, and I should be very sorry if anything were altered in this beautiful old room."

Fortunately at this moment a fresh arrival of guests diverted people's attention from this little passage of arms. The Miss Gubbingses were announced, and as Mrs. Dronington knew they were the rich daughters of a retired button-maker, and had heard also various rumours about them which were not to her liking, she regarded with no small curiosity the (to her) new phenomenon—the new feature in fashionable life which caused these girls to be not only tolerated by great and leading ladies such as Lady Horatia Nolan, but sought for and invited to country houses from which the old county neighbours of good family and standing were excluded.

Fortunately for their ambitious views, the Miss Gubbingses' poor old father, who had adhered to his early frugal habits and hours, and could never be prevailed on to place his h's right, was dead; and as their mother

had not been equally accommodating, she was suppressed. No one knew exactly where she lived,—whether she was secreted in some remote part of the Gubbingses' spacious London house, or lived in the corner of a pretty country villa they possessed near Richmond. Although invited, and even sought for, very few people cared sufficiently about these brilliant, showy, and in some respects agreeable girls, to inquire what they did with their mother; so they had little trouble on that score.

Mrs. Dronington soon observed that though they imitated Lady Horatia Nolan both in manner and dress, yet they did not appear to toady her as the old lady expected them to do; but whenever that lady appeared to be in want of anything, one of them was sure to be at hand, whether it was to write a note or recall some telling anecdote.

They flirted well, but not obtrusively—were particularly discreet in their manner towards Roland Lillyford; and Mrs. Dro-

nington soon discovered that he was a devoted admirer of the middle-aged lady of fashion, although she retained but few traces of the beauty for which she had once been celebrated. Sir Richard Nolan, her only son, was daily expected, but when a whole week passed and he did not arrive, Mrs. Dronington began to suspect that his mother did not show so much anxiety to make up the match between him and Beatrice as Lady Lillyford had represented. He and Beatrice had never met, and though Lady Horatia was always raving about the beauty and charm of her dear Beatrice, the old lady (whose perception was sharpened by her anxiety concerning the fate of a girl to whom she was becoming daily more and more attached) began to suspect that it was all a blind on the part of the great lady to get herself into comfortable quarters during an unengaged six weeks in the winter. Mrs. Dronington, moreover, was persuaded that such an apparently worldly person could

not really wish that her son, whose property was encumbered, and whose habits were expensive, should marry a girl with so little fortune as Beatrice was likely to have. For she had no doubt that Lady Horatia was well aware of Roland's extravagance and debts, and knew to a penny the rent-roll of the Oakhampton estate.

CHAPTER XI.

*The Great Lady appears to disadvantage
in a Muddy Walk.*

“**W**HAT a determined wet day this is,” said Lady Horatia, one afternoon, when she had been about three weeks at Oakhampton. “There will be no getting out, not even for a little walk on the terrace,” she added, with a suppressed yawn, laying down her embroidery. “Suppose you take me all over the house, Lady Lillyford, I have not seen half of it yet.”

Lady Horatia had that morning quarrelled with Roland, and therefore felt the time hang unusually heavy on her hands. Strange to say, she had been infatuated by him all through the London season. What had com-

menced as an amusing flirtation, had now assumed a more serious character, and to her own great surprise she found herself drifting into love with this "mere boy."

But the daily and hourly intercourse of country-house life is a severe trial, particularly for gentlemen, in such cases. He has no longer the eyes of the world to uphold him. Stripped for the time being of her terrors, of her royalties, and of her numerous devoted slaves, the lady has no longer the *prestige* of being the acknowledged queen of fashion, whose smile or frown holds in obedience the gilded saloons of London and Paris.

Through the levelling process of a muddy walk in turnip fields, or were it even among the romantic wooded glades of a park, the queen of fashion becomes a woman—a woman with dirty boots, and—well, some figures at fifty do preserve their symmetry, and some faces can encounter a north-east

wind without getting a red nose ; still, such walks or rides day after day become rather monotonous to a young man who has accustomed himself, as Roland had done, to a life of excitement, although he may fancy himself very much in love. Such was Roland's case. He had shown symptoms of being bored several times lately, more especially on this particular morning, and Lady Horatia had reproached him, declaring that he was irreclaimable, and might go to ruin in his own way, for all she cared. So they had parted in anger, and he did not appear at luncheon. Moreover, unless he should express great contrition, she felt a strong inclination to be vindictive.

"By all means," said Lady Lillyford, in reply to Lady Horatia's proposal to see the house. "We will begin with the kitchen, which is quite mediæval, a strange old place, with a gallery round the top. I believe it was the old banqueting-hall of the castle, before the house was rebuilt in Elizabeth's

reign. And Donati will not object to our passing through his domain."

We need not follow the party through the quaint corridors of the picturesque old house; we can make a short cut, and meet them in Mrs. Dronington's room, the last they entered.

"Really, Mrs. Dronington, you have the most charming room in the house," said Lady Horatia; "next time I come I shall ask you to let me have it. And what a beautifully painted picture. It must be a Gainsborough, or a Sir Joshua, is it not?"

"What, that of old Sir Charles," said Lady Lillyford, "over the mantel-piece? Very well painted, I daresay, but he looks so doleful, I could not bear to have him in my room. However, now, as you have arrived at the end of our survey, I will go down and write some letters, and you will find me in the drawing-room when they bring the tea."

"So that is old Sir Charles, is it?" said

Lady Horatia to Mrs. Dronington, when Lady Lillyford had left the room, as she sat herself down on the easy-chair, and put her feet on the fender. "Do tell me about him. The picture has startled me wonderfully, for I have seen, somewhere, a face exactly like it, and I cannot think where. Could I have dreamt it? Where was it, Clementina?" she continued, turning to one of the Miss Gubbingses, who had accompanied her into the room.

"Was it anyone we met abroad?" inquired Clementina.

"The very thing. It is the image of that handsome young Englishman whom we met in the caves of Adelsberg; I cannot think what his name was, but he told me he was studying in the University of G——. And now that I recall his face, it strikes me that he is still more like the late Lady Lillyford—the one who died in that terrible way—whose portrait hangs in the library. Strange, it has puzzled me so every morning, while

Sir Charles was reading prayers, to think where I could have seen that face before."

"I wonder, could it have been Edward Luscombe?" said Mrs. Dronington, who had heard about him from Mrs. Somerton, and knew that he was partly engaged to her daughter.

"Dear me, my letters will not be ready for post!" exclaimed Lady Horatia, looking at her watch. "Do, dear girls, go and finish them, they want directing and beheading. You will find the heads and sealing-wax all ready on my writing-table."

When the Miss Gubbingses were gone, Lady Horatia drew her chair closer to Mrs. Dronington, and said,

"I could not mention it before them, but now I remember hearing afterwards that he was old Sir Edward's natural son, and a ward of the clergyman's here."

"Then that must be Edward Luscombe," said Mrs. Dronington; "but his likeness to

Lady Lillyford must be fancy, for he had nothing to do with her."

"I am not so sure of that," said Lady Horatia, in a dogmatic tone, as she looked fixedly into the fire, and seemed to ponder deeply. "Years ago I heard some strange rumours connected with that horrible catastrophe. I cannot now remember when or where, or whether I could have dreamt them; yet, no, I cannot help having some dim recollection of some old nurse telling somebody that the dreadful woman who set fire to the house had burnt her own child, and not Lady Lillyford's. Did none of you ever hear this?"

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Dronington, with some asperity. "You could only have dreamt it. I never heard such a ridiculous idea in my life. What possible end could the woman gain by killing her own child? It is against all the rules of probability and of nature. Besides, it was well known in the village that she was devoted to her

child until he grew up. It was her one tender feeling."

"Where is she now?" inquired Lady Horatia, with some eagerness.

"She is dead long ago," said Mrs. Drington—"at least, so I heard."

"Well, that young man *is* wonderfully like the late Lady Lillyford," said Lady Horatia, rising to go. "You will say so whenever you see him—it is quite startling; the mouth and chin are identical, and it is a peculiar mouth, with lips very delicately chiselled, and the same kind of dimple in the chin. He was one of the handsomest and most high-bred-looking young men I ever saw—the Miss Gubbingses quite fell in love with him."

Curiosity, and the suspicious temper which often produces it, were strong characteristics of Lady Horatia Nolan. Besides, she liked to tell the first news—to prove that she had always suspected or known events, for it helped to give her influence,

and keep up her power as a ruler in the fashionable world. In this case she had, moreover, in her quarrel that morning with Roland, and her consequent vindictive feelings, an additional incentive to find out all she could ; and her lively imagination built up a structure upon Edward Luscombe's supposed likeness to Lady Lillyford, which likeness Mrs. Somerton's conjectures had already accounted for in another way.

Lady Horatia, however, said nothing more on the subject to Mrs. Dronington, nor did she appear to make any further attempt to ascertain from anyone at Oakhampton whether the author of all this misery was really dead or not.

CHAPTER XII.

Suspicion.

AFTER this conversation, Mrs. Dronington put on her bonnet, and without even waiting to ring as usual for her maid, donned the rest of her walking attire, and hurried downstairs, unperceived, as she hoped, by any of the party. But just as she was opening the hall door, Beatrice ran across the hall and begged to accompany her in her walk.

“No, no, not to-day,” said Mrs. Dronington—“I am in a great hurry, and, besides, it’s raining. I want to—to go and see a poor woman who is ill, and you must not come; you know your mamma objects to it—there, don’t detain me.”

Then she went out and closed the door after her, leaving Beatrice to wonder at her most unusual hurry and agitation. Mrs. Dronington walked quickly towards the little church, from which there was a path that led direct to the village. She had not intended to visit any of the cottages, but as her conscience reproached her for having said what was not exactly true to her granddaughter, she determined to call in to see an old woman who lived near the church in the village, and was nearly blind, before she proceeded on the errand which had brought her out alone at an unwonted hour.

The blind woman had formerly lived as housemaid at the Hall. Mrs. Dronington remembered her well, for she had attended upon her during the visits she paid there in her early youth, long before the late Sir Edward's marriage.

The old dame was rather deaf as well as blind, and Mrs. Dronington had much difficulty in explaining who she was. At last,

however, when she became aware that the good Miss Fenwick, sister of that beautiful Nelly Fenwick whom everybody loved, had come to her cottage, then the old dame was overjoyed, and, wiping a chair, begged her to be seated.

“I thought it were a voice that put me in mind of them old times at the Hall, it sounded so soft and cheery-like, more than gentlefolk’s voices do now-a-days, leastways always except our good Miss Peggy and Mrs. Somerton. And so a new set o’ gentlefolks is come to the Hall? Ah! well-a-day, times is changed, and Tim says it’s all along o’ them railroads, ’cause they be always taking people away from every place to Lunnun, or some great town, but never brings no good to country folks. Well, and yet I do think that if our young lady had a-lived——”

“Were you at the Hall when she died?” inquired Mrs. Dronington, rather eagerly.

“Surely then I was, an’ a awful time we

had. I often wake up now in the dead o' the nights, an' think I hear the screams that woke me up that night. Many a time I've said to Tim, 'That's my lady's voice a-calling out;' and sometimes I can even smell the smoke—the dreadful smell of the burnt Christian flesh, of the poor innocent babe as was a-burnt in his cradle. It was over the whole house, and my lady, I can see her now running along the passages fit to break her neck, and calling, 'Oh! give me the child safe, my darling baby!' And Sir Edward he burst open the door, and at once the flames came all across the passage, and my lady's dress took fire, and her beautiful hair that had fallen down all over her shoulders, and Sir Edward and Mr. Jobson tried to put it out, and held her back, for she tried so hard to get into the room. They says she had the strength of madness, so that four men could scarce hold her; and the pump and engines was played in at the window. At last the fire went out, and then Sir Edward

he went in first, but was so choked with smoke, he fell down quite insensible, close by where the cradle had been, and they couldn't hold my lady back any longer. But there was such a smoke all along the passages we could not see our hands before us, and some of the maids went to try and save their own things, for they all thought the whole Hall would be burnt. But I couldn't a-bear to be away from my lady, so I ketched up a rug and put it over my shoulders, cause I'd nothing but my night shimy on, and tried to get into the nursery. My goodness, what a hawful sight it were, to be sure! The blue morning light just shone in at the window, and seemed to mix like with the red embers that was still smouldering here and there along the walls. My lady was curled up on the floor, which seemed to be still burning, just as might be where the baby's cradle had stood, and she were a-clinging to a skeleton: there was nothing but blackened bones that she'd a-found.

Sir Edward had come to himself, and were a-looking all about quite bewildered like, as if he couldn't so much as understand that poor blackened mass of bones was her child; and the men had got to where the bed was, and hoped to find the poor nurse was alive, which that part seemed not so much burnt as where the cradle had a-been. The nurse was not burnt, but quite dead—sufficated, they said, with the smoke.”

“But the baby was nothing but bones, I remember hearing.”

“Nothing; and how my lady did shriek and groan, and called for her child, and said that was not her baby; and she raved quite mad-like, and they couldn't get the bones out of her hands.”

“And she never recovered her reason?”

“Not till a moment or so afore she died, as I heard them say, for I was not let into the room after she'd been carried back into her own room; not one of the servants wasn't let go anigh the passages, 'cause she

wasn't to hear any sound at all. But there was four doctors a-attending of her all that live-long day and through the night, but she wouldn't touch a bit o' food, and drew back scared-like from everybody, and never even knowed her own husband till, as I said, just afore she died ; and then, as old Nurse Ayres afterwards told me, she let go the skeleton of the poor child that she would have, wrapped in a cloth, by her ; she pushed it away like, Nurse Ayres said, and took hold of her husband's hands with both o' hers, and looked up into his face as if she wished to speak something ; and then she clasped her hands as if she was a-praying, with his all the time between hers, and she smiled. Her lips moved, but Nurse could hear no sound, and Nurse know'd she were a-dying, 'cause she looked so happy, and she give a great sigh and sank back. Sir Edward wouldn't believe she were dead, and he was so happy to see her smile ; but after he found she was getting quite

cold he went a'most mad, and, as you know, ma'am, he never was hisself again."

"I suppose you told all this to Mrs. Semerton?" inquired Mrs. Dronington after a pause.

"Many's the time, for she be always a-questioning me about it, and about that wicked Rachel; and what seems to terrify her most is these bones, and how it came that all the flesh to be burnt away and only leave a skeleton; and she wanted to know whether the doctors see'd it. 'Maybe they did,' says I; but then you know, lack-a-day, poor Sir Edward went mad like, and there was nobody to act, and though there was a great to-do about the poor child's body, and all the neighbours came far and near, yet nobody seed to nothing."

"Was there not a report that Rachel Harraway was somehow or other concerned in the dreadful events?" asked Mrs. Dronington.

"Yes, that there was; cook declared she

heard her a-screaming under her window ; she was sure it was her voice ; and gardener said he see her going through the plantation with a bundle in her arms. Leastways he see'd a figure, but when he was questioned by the crowner, and the justices axed him how he came to be near the plantations at that time o' night, he couldn't remember no particulars about it ; but people did say that was 'cause his wife were jealous, and he didn't want it to be proved where he had a-been that evening. So nothing was done agin Rachel."

"But the cook, why did she think the screaming she heard was Rachel's voice?"

"'Cause she knowed her well afore Sir Edward married, and she and Rachel had many a quarrel, for she were a downright termagant when she was angered, as she had a-been with poor Jemmy, him as she kept company with before, as ill-luck would have it, Sir Edward first saw her face. Poor Jemmy ! he went mad too, and was

put in a lunatic asylum, and now lives wi' Mrs. Somerton as gardener ; but what was I a-saying ?—oh ! yes, cook had lived in the next cottage to the Harraways, and seed Rachel the night Jemmy found it all out, and swore he'd murder her and himself too, and Rachel she set up a scream as if 'twas the end of the world, and she went into fits as wanted four people to hold her, she did."

"But was she staying in the village at that dreadful time when the poor girl was burnt ?"

"No, not as I know'd on ; she warn't never heard on here after her child was born, and my lady found it all out."

"And how long was that before poor Lady Lillyford was confined ?"

"Well, let me see, I think it must have been—well, yes, 'twas in haymaking time, I know, 'cause Tim (he was a-courting of me then) comed up to the garden gate when they was making hay in the meadow handy,

and my lady was helping—she and Sir Edward were tossing the hay in each other's faces—I could see them at the other end of the field. Deary me! it seems only but yesterday—I can think I smell the sweet hay; and the sun did shine so bright, and Tim he says, says he, pointing to Sir Edward and my lady, 'We'll be as happy as them two some day—let it be next Michaelmas.' And says I, 'No, I must earn more first, and so must thou.' Ah! well-a-day, that was the last time the poor lady ever played in the hayfield, or anywhere else, for the matter of that, and that made me mind it so sadly well. For the very next day, I do believe it was that foreign maid of hers as did the mischief, for sure nobody would have gone and said a word agin master, so kind as he was to all, though many of us did know that Rachel had a child that night. Not a word would have reached my dear lady's ears if I could have saved her pain, I'd have given my right hand, I would, for

so good and beautiful and kind as she was. Sir Edward was out early that morning, but whether anyone had a-told him about Rachel, I can't say, but as ill-luck would have it, he did not come in at the breakfast hour, and my lady had had some suspicions, for off she set by herself all across the Park, as I heard afterwards, and never stopped till she got near the copse as is a stone's throw of Harraway's cottage, and there she met Sir Edward. Nobody ever knew what she or he said, but he carried her all the way home in his arms, and when he got to the hall-door Mr. Snodge (he as was butler then) said Sir Edward looked twenty years older, and so we all thought when we saw him afterwards, and as if he could never smile or laugh again; and my lady fainted dead away several times that day, and the doctor as come from Hollington said he didn't think she would live. And surely she never held up her pretty head again,

and never smiled, only when she saw how Sir Edward took on."

"And when was Lady Lillyford's child born?—I mean, how soon after Rachel Harraway's?" inquired the matter-of-fact old lady.

"Let me see. Ah, well now, I mind it was one of they dark dull days afore Christmas. Yes, well, I mind it now, 'cause Sally that was kitchen-maid was gone out for a holiday, and so cook asked me to help make the mincemeat for Christmas pies; and I was a-doing of it when Mr. Snodge ran in and called out to send for Doctor James, for my lady was a-took ill, and I left the mincemeat and run upstairs into the passage nigh by her room, for I did love my lady more nor ever I did any Christian mortal but Tim; and I stood there and shook, 'cause I wouldn't venture near the door for fear o' making a noise; and I saw Nurse Ayres after a bit come out, but I couldn't see her face, 'cause it was so dark, so I crept up close, for, says I to myself,

if I can look on her face I shall know, 'cause she did love my poor lady too. But she went 'tother way, hurried like, so I feared mortally, and I kneeled down and prayed, I did, harder than I ever did afore or since, that Almighty God would spare my dear lady, and give her a living child. I prayed so fervent like, that I didn't seem to know how the time went or where I was, till I was startled by seeing lights, and the doctor and a many more coming up the big staircase. I knew Sir Edward he was in my lady's room, for he had never let her out of sight ever since that dreadful day when she found it all out. So I seed the doctor go in quite quiet like, and his face didn't tell me nothin', though the candle shone upon it. So I crept near and tried to hear, and was more frightened than even the day my lady had found out all, I was, and big drops o' sweat stood on my forehead. And then the time seemed so long, as it would never end, for I seemed too flustered

like even to pray. I couldn't find no words, could do nothing but listen; but it was all as quiet as death. At last I heard a baby's cry, and I well-nigh jumped for joy; but then I seemed to hear a whispering, and I 'gan to tremble again, I did, and I prayed again right down in earnest, for, says I, if she can but live now she'll be happy with her baby. And I was a-praying still when Nurse Ayres comed out at last, and I saw now by her face all was right, and she looked at me pleased like, 'cause she knowed how dearly I loved my lady."

"And this," asked Mrs. Dronington, "must have been about five or six months after Rachel's child was born, and she was very happy with her child till that dreadful fire. How long was it?—nearly a year?"

"From Michaelmas, I know, 'cause Tim was a-reproaching me about it, and one of Farmer Dowling's ricks were burnt when he was a-working there, and they said it was a 'cendiary fire; but I has my own thoughts

about that too, though Tim says it was all nonsense, 'cause Rachel was at York wi' her child, they said."

"And had she any grudge against Farmer Dowling, that made you suspect her?"

"Yes, she had, and says I, when a person is given up to such fearful temper and passions as Rachel, they ain't a-answerable for what they does, no more nor my lady's parrot that bit through Mary's finger, only then she is far wickeder, 'cause being a Christian she ought not to give way to such evil tempers."

"And you have told all this to Mrs. Somerton, you say?"

"Yes, many's the time, and to Mr. Mordaunt times upon times, and I do believe he'd often been at Rachel herself, but never could make nothing out of her, for says he she was as hard as a stone, and didn't care for man or devil."

At this moment the subject of their conversation (Mr. Mordaunt) entered the cottage,

for it was drawing towards the dark hour, as the old dame called it, when either the good vicar or his sister often visited the poor cottagers who most required the comfort of a little cheerful talk.

CHAPTER XIII.

Mrs. Dronington hears more News.

THE object of Mrs. Dronington's walk had been to call on Mr. Mordaunt, but as it was now getting dark she begged him to accompany her part of the way to Oakhampton Hall.

In the course of her walk she pursued her inquiry, but without mentioning the painful surmise which Lady Horatia's words had created in her mind. Therefore the conversation chiefly turned upon the Somertons and young Edward Luscombe.

Mrs. Somerton had informed Mrs. Dronington of that young man's proposal to her daughter, and therefore she felt a great interest in hearing all that Mr. Mordaunt could tell about him.

“And do you really consider that he is likely to be worthy of such a very charming—such a superior young person as Miss Somerton?”

“I had great hopes that he was. When he came over to England, in the vain hope of seeing his father, and—his guilty mother, he prepossessed me most favourably. He has a joyous disposition, and I should say, by nature, a happy mind; yet he showed that he had power to suffer deeply about the melancholy state of his father, and lamented the despondent spirit or seclusion which prevented him from finding any alleviation to his misery and never-ending self-reproach. Young Edward thought of numerous plans to win his father from his despondency, and with all the enthusiasm of youth endeavoured to enlist my help to carry them out. I had the greatest difficulty—a difficulty I rejoiced in, because it called forth his persistent efforts in his father’s behalf—but I did convince him at last that nothing could be done;

that to approach the old man, either in his own name, or under any disguise, would only bring on one of those paroxysms of misery which I knew well the very thought of the poor boy's existence always produced. Edward suffered keenly from this exclusion, so that I can scarcely think of the expression of his countenance without a pang. In fact, I sometimes regret now that I did not allow him to follow his own impulse to throw himself at his father's feet. I very often think I was wrong, particularly as Mrs. Somerton seems to have been struck with his likeness to poor Lady Lillyford. That very likeness might have soothed and disarmed Sir Edward's dislike to the boy."

"Well, you did it for the best, no doubt," said Mrs. Dronington; "and you are sure he, young Luscombe was sincere, and that no worldly motives made him wish that his father should become reconciled to him?"

"Quite sure. There was not a spark of

self-interest in that open, honest face. But —but I am not quite so happy about him now.”

“Why, what have you heard?”

“Oh! nothing that evinces worldliness; but—but I fear his constancy to Miss Somerton is being put through a terrible ordeal. There seems to be a marvellous syren who is captivating everybody, and I heard lately from my old pupil, John Sterndale, that she was only diverted from her determination to turn the head and secure the heart of Edward Luscombe by the arrival of a more valuable prize; strange to say, the very man who has lately succeeded to a fine property on yonder hill—Fercote.”

“Oh! the fine old place that used to belong to the Gordons?”

“Yes, it was bought by a very eccentric old gentleman, and he died not very long ago, and left it, with the great bulk of his property, to a distant relation, with the condition that he should take the name of Fair-

leigh. His sisters also inherited considerable sums, and have taken the same name."

"And who is the syren? Some designing foreigner, I suppose. I always maintain that people get more harm than good by these foreign tours."

"She is a German, and first cousin to a very charming girl, I hear, who, by-the-by, is related to the late Lady Lillyford's family as well as Mrs. Somerton."

"Oh! ah! yes. I've heard something about it, and that they put her in a convent, or some such dreadful place, till she consented to marry a Venetian Count something. Yes. Beatrice met her somewhere in Italy, and she raved about her. I remember now, and she told me lately it was all right, and that the poor young lady liked the count, and was not unhappy even in the convent, but I could scarcely believe it."

"And perhaps, then, your grand-daughter may have met her fascinating cousin as

well, for it seems they have been brought up together in the same convent."

"Ah! then no wonder she is trying to do mischief now. Well, I only hope she won't succeed, for it would be a great pity that fine old place should fall into the hands of such a person. But has poor Mr. Luscombe got safely away from her, and are his eyes opened to her worldliness?"

"I fear not, but I have written to him, detailing the rumours that reached us, and his answer will show, I hope, the state of his mind and heart. For Miss Somerton's sake I feel anxious about him, as well as from the interest he excited in me during his sad visit to England. It seems strange that my old pupil, Sterndale, should have fallen in with this Mr. Fairleigh, our future neighbour. He met him on the Nile, and they travelled together for some time; and then they went to see a brother of Sterndale's, who is staying at Gratz, and this boy was a great friend of young Luscombe, and

also of a young relation of Count Hohenstein, whose late wife was, as you know, half-sister to Mrs. Somerton. So Sterndale and his friend were invited to the castle, where there seems to be quite a sort of open house just now—a constant succession of *fêtes*, previous to the marriage of the daughter.”

“Yes, I remember hearing that Mrs. Somerton had some foreign relations who were rich. Well, but as she has always been so poor herself, would it not be a very imprudent match for her daughter? I thought old Sir Edward had only left him a hundred a year, if so much?”

“Very true, but Miss Somerton is accustomed to do with very little; besides, young Luscombe seems to be not only full of talent, but has, I fancy, both good sense and perseverance. That is his character at Gratz, for Sterndale told me so.”

“Yet, if he is so taken with that foreign young lady, it does not seem to denote

much common sense or good feeling, does it ?”

Mr. Mordaunt could only shrug his shoulders, for although he felt that some allowance might be made for a very young man when placed in a situation of peculiar fascination, he knew that, with Mrs. Dronington’s prejudices about foreigners and foreign education, it would be useless to say anything in his defence.

“Has Miss Somerton any suspicion of his inconstancy ?”

“I hope it scarcely amounts to that, for Mr. Sterndale’s last letter was so full of the young lady’s attempt to captivate Mr. Fairleigh, and of what he feared was treachery towards the young cousin, in trying to ensnare the heart of Count Rossi. I believe Mrs. Somerton has not mentioned anything about it to her daughter, yet I fear that something young Luscombe must have said, or omitted to say, in his late letters, had made her unhappy, more so than she was be-

fore. Of course she was extremely grieved when she discovered he was the son of such a guilty woman. She did not know of this until her arrival here, whence she can look from her windows on the very place, even the very room, where poor Lady Lillyford died; and to impress her still more deeply with the consciousness of his mother's worthlessness, this old gardener whom they found at their house is the broken-hearted suitor, the man who went mad when he discovered the deception practised on him by Rachel Harraway. But here we are almost in sight of the Hall," he added, "and I cannot accompany you farther. For you know Lady Lillyford has never returned my sister's visit. We thought it was our duty to call, although Sir Charles has told me, after a good deal of hesitation, that his wife was very—that in fact she did not like country neighbours, and had made up her mind not to visit any."

"Ah! I know my poor daughter is very foolish indeed, but a good deal of it comes

from living so long in foreign parts," said Mrs. Dronington, with a blush and a self-delusive attempt to excuse her daughter's foibles.

CHAPTER XIV.

Beatrice is much perplexed at the Ways of the World.

MR. MORDAUNT then took leave, but he was scarcely out of sight before Beatrice came running along the path from the Hall door, and expressing great joy at her grandmother's return, for it was so unusually late that she had become alarmed, and was walking up and down near the house under the shadows of the fine oaks.

"Dear girl," said Mrs. Dronington, as she returned the joyous embrace of her grandchild with affectionate warmth, "nobody cares, except you, whether I came home safe or not: I am sure I ought to be most thankful that after being out of England so long you

do care for me as much, even more than—well, I suppose we must hurry in to dress, or we shall be late for dinner. Not that that is easy, either, for these fashionable people do keep such late hours.”

Beatrice’s curiosity to know where her grandmother had been, and why she was so anxious to go alone, was very great. However, she asked no question, but perhaps Mrs. Dronington’s faculties, quickened by a newly-awakened affection, a daily-increasing love, which she had not experienced for anyone since her favourite sister Nelly’s death, were able to divine her grandchild’s thoughts; for she told her, after they came up to their rooms that night, that she had been talking with Mr. Mor-daunt about the Somertons and young Mr. Luscombe.

Beatrice had not before heard of her old friend’s engagement, and yet since their meeting after church in London she had often found herself wondering whether El-

frida had found some one to love. Many vague ideas and fancies about Elfrida, and the change of expression in her countenance since those happy days at Sorrento, entered her mind as she walked through the woods at Oakhampton.

Perhaps the tranquil beauty of the scenery, the reposeful influence which had called forth the consciousness of her own feelings towards Arthur Brookfield, made her more alive to the suspicion of some such sentiment in Elfrida. It was therefore with the greatest interest that she now heard from her grandmother the whole history of their engagement, and thanked her warmly for allowing her to know of it.

“Edward Luscombe!” she exclaimed—
“why, that is the very person I heard Lady Horatia whispering about to mamma, and she says they all fell in love with him; and I heard her describing him to Roland afterwards, and her eyes flashed so, that somehow I felt quite frightened; it seemed to

make her angry with him, and oh! how puzzling everything seems to me sometimes now! I often feel as if I had been asleep all my life till I came here, except that summer at Sorrento, when I was so much with the Somertons. But when we were going from one of those places to another, which mamma called gay, I didn't half care for anything—at least, so it seems now, when I look back upon it; all was wearisome to me, yet I never felt tired. Oh! granny, how often I wish now that my two dear little sisters had not been left at school in Paris. I think they would be so much happier and better here. How they would enjoy running about in these beautiful woods! They never saw such giant oaks as we have here.”

“I am glad you like old England so much, dear child,” said Mrs. Dronington.

“Indeed I do. But oh! dear granny, what do you think?” added Beatrice, with a sudden look of pain. “While I was

waiting under the trees to-day, looking out for you, I heard papa and Roland talking, and oh ! I could cry to think of it—Roland wants papa to cut down those splendid trees, that are ever so many centuries old. He says they would quite clear off his debts.”

“But your papa did not consent, surely?” said Mrs. Dronington, turning round suddenly from her dressing-table with a face of alarm. “Surely he never would !”

“He didn’t like it. I think I heard him say so, but Roland looked so angry, and papa so miserable, that I was afraid to let them see me, and so I went farther away among the evergreen oaks. But now I come to think of it, I am in hopes papa did not consent, because Roland was so very cross and out of sorts this evening, and you saw he scarcely spoke to anybody.”

“This poor old place !” sighed Mrs. Dronington. “To think how changed it is since sister Nelly slept in your room here ! Well, good night, darling, and don’t let us

grieve too much at misfortunes we cannot help. I wish—oh ! how I do wish—there, never mind. Good night,” and the old lady lay down to rest with the strong yet unuttered wish that Beatrice should not be deprived of the companionship of friends who, like the Somertons, she had wit enough to feel would be of use to her grand-daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

Mrs. Somerton's Dream.

WHILE Mrs. Dronington and Beatrice were sleeping peacefully in their beds at Oakhampton Hall, Mrs. Somerton was dreaming of that very place. She dreamt that she was in the late Lady Lillyford's bedroom, looking with anxious curiosity into the drawers of an old Indian cabinet which stood in a deep recess of the south bay-window. She had never been in this room in her waking hours, for although the late Lady Lillyford was her first cousin, and they had been brought up together like sisters, yet she had not seen her since she first went to India after her own marriage, and at that time the beautiful Matilda was

not even acquainted with her future husband.

Mrs. Somerton loved and admired her cousin with more than a sister's affection, and the separation from her, when they were both only eighteen, had been one of the few drawbacks to her otherwise most happy marriage. Soon after her arrival in India she had heard of her cousin's engagement to a man who, though much older than herself, was highly approved of by all her relations.

The late Sir Edward Lillyford bore a high character, and as he still retained the handsome features and great personal charm which had won for him extensive popularity among all classes, it seemed that the intense love he evinced for the beautiful young girl was fully reciprocated. In fact, it had been a love-match on both sides, and Mrs. Somerton had rejoiced in the prospect her beloved friend seemed to have of perfect happiness in her married life.

Lady Lillyford had received the same careful training and instruction as her afterwards celebrated cousin, and possessed nearly as much genius and power. During the first six months after her marriage, Oakhampton Hall was a scene of true hospitality and agreeable society. It had been Matilda's *beau-ideal* to keep up the old spirit of country sociability ; and having a number of near relations both of her own and her husband's, she delighted in having all kinds of amusements for them. She wrote several plays, in which the parts were particularly adapted to those who were to act them, and she composed the music of the songs and overtures, and although she never acted herself, she was such a good stage-manager and scene painter that the performances were most successful. All this Mrs. Somerton had heard.

Then had come the sad news of her sudden illness and its fatal cause, not by letter from herself, for she did not write to Mrs.

Somerton from that time until after the birth of her child. She would not send a letter to her dear friend in India until she could feel in some degree happy again. This of course was the last letter she wrote or Mrs. Somerton had received from her, for soon afterwards occurred the fatal accident which deprived her of her child and caused her death.

Mrs. Somerton preserved this letter with all those written in the first happy days of her marriage, and she had been reading them over that evening. There was something terribly touching in the last—the under-current of sadness which the writer vainly tried to conceal by making the most of the joy she really felt in possessing a lovely child.

After detailing her little plans for its future life, and describing its dark eyes and intelligent forehead, resembling her husband's, the letter went on to say :

“But my child promises to have the dark

and arched eyebrows you have always liked in me so much more than they deserve. If anything happen to me or Sir Edward, dearest sister, you must promise me to watch over my child. Pray, pray promise me to do this, or I could not die in peace. Oh! for one hour's talk with you! Remember, I have kept a diary, in which I have detailed everything, and all my inmost thoughts and prayers. I shall direct it for you, not to be opened by any one else. Remember that you must have it, and read every word, and do all I ask you in it, as far as you possibly can."

The passages which had succeeded this had been erased, and it again ended with an earnest prayer that Mrs. Somerton would watch over her poor boy.

Hearing of her dear friend's death, a short time after receiving this letter, Mrs. Somerton had written to Sir Edward and begged him to send her the Diary Lady Lillyford had spoken of in her last letter. No answer

came for a long time, and then the unsatisfactory intelligence that none had been found. Yet during all the long years that had elapsed since then Mrs. Somerton ever retained the conviction that it must exist somewhere, and since her arrival at Oakhampton she longed to cause a search to be made, but the rudeness of the present Lady Lillyford had hitherto deterred her from attempting it.

Probably her thoughts were full of this subject when she went to sleep, at any rate in her dream she saw the beautiful Lady Lillyford as distinctly as when she had left her a blooming girl, and thought that she was showing her over Oakhampton Hall. She led her up the carved oak staircase and along the gallery: when they had reached a door half way along it, Lady Lillyford pointed to it with a look of sudden horror and put her finger to her lips as if to enjoin silence. Then proceeding farther on she opened the door of a spacious bedroom, and beckoned to Mrs. Somerton to enter.

They then approached an old Indian cabinet which stood in the deep bay window. This she unlocked, and opening a particular drawer pressed a spring, which disclosed a secret recess filled with manuscript; then with a pleading look on her face she pointed to the manuscript, and her figure seemed to melt away

As is usual in dreams Mrs. Somerton did not feel surprised at this, but proceeded to examine the contents of the secret recess. She took out a sealed parcel, and found it was directed to herself. In trying to burst the seal and undo it she let it fall, and the noise it seemed to make on the oak floor startled her so that she woke up in one of the sudden frights we sometimes experience when an interesting dream comes to an unexpected close.

It was daylight. She started up in bed, uncertain what to think of what was after all nothing but a dream. She tried to get rid of the impression, but, in spite of her efforts,

found herself wishing to know whether all she had seen in her dream was really like Oakhampton Hall, and whether it could be possible that this secret recess had been overlooked, and that the precious diary and other manuscripts were really still there.

Besides the diary her eye had caught sight of two manuscript plays which she remembered having heard Lady Lillyford had written for her friends to act. She saw the titles outside in Matilda's clear writing. Mrs. Somerton had often wished to read them.

How strange if all those valuable manuscripts could be found at last ! Musing and conjecturing in this manner she fell asleep again, and slept till later than usual, as if fatigued by her dream. She did not wake until Elfrida came into the room to ask if she was ready for breakfast, and then she said, in answer to her inquiries,

“ I must tell you my curious dream, but not before breakfast, for we are late ; and besides, you know,” added Mrs. Somerton

laughingly, "the old superstition, if one tells a dream before breakfast it will not come true."

CHAPTER XVI.

“Are Ideas and Impressions floating in the Atmosphere?”

SOMETIMES it is impossible to avoid the strange conviction that particular ideas or impressions pervade the atmosphere; for instance, when different people appear to be struck with the same idea at the same moment. It happened so then. Elfrida's first question was:

“Did you dream about Oakhampton Hall?”

Mrs. Somerton briefly described it, and then the great object of both seemed to be to see Mrs. Dronington (which, under the circumstances, seemed to be an impossibility), and ascertain from her whether the vision

were really like Oakhampton Hall, and to induce her to search in the Indian cabinet, if such existed in any bedroom like the one she saw in her dream.

During breakfast they thought over every possible plan, and Mrs. Somerton meditated writing to Mrs. Dronington and asking her to favour them with a visit on a matter of some importance.

Now it so happened that Mrs. Dronington's mind had been so filled with the old housemaid's narrative on the previous day, that she was herself determined to see Mrs. Somerton, in the hope of learning something.

She therefore resolved to go there that very morning before luncheon, and this time she made no secret of it to her granddaughter, so it was settled that Beatrice was to accompany her as far as the park gates, when they had breakfasted.

Thus, while Mrs. Somerton and her daughter were still revolving in their minds how to

carry out their wishes, they saw the little gate open and Mrs. Dronington approaching the house. Their delight was such that they both ran out into the hall to open the door before the old lady had time to ring the bell.

Their exclamations almost startled her out of her wits.

"Oh, let me ask, dear mamma!" said Elfrida. "Is there an old oak staircase with carved flowers and fruits, and is there an old Indian cabinet in the late Lady Lillyford's bed-room?"

"Yes, to be sure there is," replied Mrs. Dronington; "and who in the world says there is not? But why are you so anxious to know?"

"Because I dreamt last night," said Mrs. Somerton, "that I was there, and I could describe to you exactly the old oak staircase with a long corridor at the top, and the second door on the left I knew to be the burnt room, and the door at the further end

opens into what used to be the late Lady Lillyford's bed-room, over the eastern end of the long drawing-room, with a lovely bay window in it, which looks all over the park ; and at one side of this bay window I thought that there stood an antique Indian cabinet, and I dreamed that in a secret drawer in one of its recesses there is a packet of papers and letters of great importance addressed to me by my dear cousin. It is a packet which she told me she would leave for me ; she told me of it in the last letter I ever received from her, and though the late Sir Edward looked everywhere for it, it never could be found."

"How very strange !" said Mrs. Dronington ; "and I came here on purpose to ask you about her and her sad fate, and about the death of her little child. The old housemaid yesterday gave me a long account of it, and it interested me so much I longed to ask you if you could tell me any more."

"Oh, you have seen old Molly," said Mrs.

Somerton, "well, she could tell you more than I could do myself; in fact, except from her I never heard but the barest outline of the terrible misfortune or crime which caused the death of my friend; and her death was the first great grief I ever had. I was in India when it happened, and I did not return to England for many years."

"Well," said Mrs. Dorrington, "I'll go back at once and see about it, that I will; I'm sure nothing ought to be left undone to find such a document as that. When people are dead, nobody thinks about their wishes now-a-days."

The last sentence was added *sotto voce*, as she was about to leave the room.

On returning to Oakhampton Hall, she found Lady Lillyford and Lady Horatia in the long drawing-room, leaning back in arm-chairs, holding hand-screens and discussing their neighbours—not country neighbours, indeed, for those they quietly suppressed from their gossip lists, but that section of

the general public which fell in the way of their manners and customs.

“It was my fault letting her leave off the backboard,” thought Mrs. Dronington.

The Miss Gubbingses were getting rid of the remaining interval between breakfast and luncheon by practising one of the modern varieties of cup and ball.

“I wish you would give me the key of the Indian cabinet in the late Lady Lillyford’s bed-room, Eliza; I want to look inside it particularly.”

“The key of the Indian cabinet!—what can you want with that?” asked Lady Lillyford, by no means inclined to move out of her easy chair.

“Mrs. Somerton has just told me of a curious dream she had last night about this place, relating to the finding of some missing papers left to her by the late Lady Lillyford. She dreamt that they were in a secret drawer of the Indian cabinet in Lady Lillyford’s bedroom, and I promised her

to open it at once and look for them."

"What nonsense!—I thought Mrs. Somerton was a blue, and a strong-minded woman, and those kind of people never believe in dreams, and omens, and ghosts—though, as far as that goes, neither do I; it is nothing in the world but a ruse to get inside this house, and force me to call on her, and that I am determined I will not do. I hate those pushing people."

"Yes, I hate pushing people," said Lady Horatia.

Her audience at Oakhampton was smaller and less varied than she liked, yet she would not allow the number to be increased by any country neighbours, and on this point she considered herself very consistent and conscientious.

"No, pray, dear Mrs. Dronington, do not bring any pushing people here," said she, "otherwise I shall go off at once; and you know, as I have often explained, I think it very wrong to do as some great ladies of my

acquaintance do, to make acquaintances in country neighbourhoods, and then cut them if they chance to come across me in London. No, I never would do such a vulgar thing as that; an acquaintance once made becomes quite sacred, in my opinion, and I consider it quite a sin to change or even grow colder towards them. You see those Gubbings girls, I never gave them up, and I got them to endless balls in London, though they are nobodies, merely because I happened to become intimate with them at Carlsbad one season."

The young ladies in question during this speech, which was made in the most solemn and decided manner, assumed an *air pénétré* for the occasion.

"I had no idea of bringing Mrs. Somerton here, because I knew *my daughter* did not wish it," said Mrs. Dronington; "nor had she the least intention of coming; she is much too well-bred to force herself upon people where she is not wanted. And as

to country neighbours, I am an old woman, and cannot help contrasting the manners of my youth with those of ladies in these days, and am obliged to own that the comparison is not favourable to the latter. I remember that my poor mother, Lady Jane, used to make it her great object, while she was in London, during the time Parliament sat, to collect things and subjects together to amuse her country neighbours in the autumn and winter. Her husband's old place, and her country neighbours, had far greater attraction for her than the foggy streets, and never was anybody so happy as she, or so much beloved as she was in the North. I may be excused, perhaps, for thinking her way was the best. But then all her ancestors had done the same, generation after generation," muttered the old lady very audibly, with a tinge of colour in her cheeks.

Lady Horatia pretended to be suddenly interested by a paragraph in the *Times*, for

she knew what Mrs. Dronington alluded to, and felt she had the worst of it this time.

“Well, my dear,” continued Mrs. Dronington, turning to her daughter, “cannot you give me the key ; it really is not right to keep papers belonging to another person. I will go and look myself, and will promise you not to bring anybody *here*.”

“Really,” drawled Lady Lillyford, “I never had a key, and do not know anything about it. Beatrice, go and ask your father ; the steward gave him all the keys and things when we came from abroad.”

But Sir Charles had gone out, and when at last he returned, though many keys were tried, the right one could not be found.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Great Lady's Visit is a Failure.

SINCE her quarrel with Roland, Lady Horatia Nolan had become rather bored at Oakhampton Hall. It suited her convenience to remain there for the present, so she had tried to make the best of what she at first feared would be rather an unpromising visit. She had, moreover, good dinners at Oakhampton, which she fully enjoyed, and she had the pleasure of being exclusive ruler there. Various young men were invited, or sent away, exactly as she wished; nevertheless, in one letter to a friend she wrote as follows :—

“Lady Lillyford is so depressingly stupid and unimpressible, that one can never

either surprise or amuse, or scarcely even offend her. Yet she is full of obstinate and foolish prejudices—in fact, the most unpracticable person I ever met with. I hope you will return home soon, and let me come, for I am dying of *ennui* in this gloomy old place.”

On her part Lady Lillyford was much disappointed in her fine guests, and almost as little reconciled as before their arrival to a “dull country life,” so she was urgent in her entreaty that Sir Charles would take a house in London, at all events for the season.

“It was quite a shame,” she said, “to shut Beatrice up in this way, and not allow her the chance of making a good match before she became old and ugly, by vegetating in such a dreadful old place.”

In vain he protested that they could not afford it just then, with the succession duty to pay, besides Roland’s debts; and added, in an under-tone,

“ You *would* invite that great airified lady and those two stuck-up underbred girls, because you wanted to make up a good match with her son, and he has actually been so impertinent as never to come ; and what’s more, I don’t believe now his mother ever wished it. It was all a blind, because she wanted to dispose of herself somewhere for a few weeks, and liked to do the grand before those young ladies and gentlemen, to show her influence, and what fools she could make of us. I wonder you can be so taken in ; and besides, I believe she was in love with Roland, and yet I think she is too worldly-wise to make a fool of herself by marrying him. But she liked to have him dangling after her. However, I think he had the sense to rebel, and that’s the only good he has done since he came. For she was downright angry I saw,—in fact, I sometimes think she will try to do him a bad turn, though I don’t know how that can be, unless she contrives to make him gamble more.”

“Well, but he has made his peace with her now; you know she has asked him to go to Downlands on the 24th, and he said he should go.”

Sir Charles had plenty of arguments to prove the folly of taking a house in London, yet, in spite of all he said, the dull obstinacy of his wife gradually seemed as if it must soon have its usual effect on his easy-going and pliant disposition. Yet he might have held out longer, had not an event occurred, soon after the departure of the guests, which frightened Lady Lillyford so much, that she declared it was quite impossible to remain at Oakhampton any longer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Although Lady Lillyford does not believe in Ghosts, she resolves not to sleep another night at Oakhampton.

ONE day, about three weeks after the departure of the Miss Gubbingses, Sir Charles and Roland went up to London on business, and Lady Lillyford, having a bad headache, went to bed early.

Mrs. Dronington was still at Oakhampton. Beatrice had implored her to remain, and although the old lady thought it was quite time for her to return to her own house, as she saw that her presence gave but little pleasure or comfort to her daughter, yet her affection for Beatrice was so great that she consented to remain a few weeks longer.

They had searched everywhere in vain for a key to open the old Indian cabinet, but Mrs. Dronington had determined, before her departure, to ask for Sir Charles's permission to break it open. Of course she was unwilling to do this if it could be avoided, and therefore they went on from time to time trying all the keys they could find or borrow.

On this particular evening, after Lady Lillyford had left the drawing-room, Beatrice and her grandmother remained there for some time, as the old lady wanted to finish a piece of work she had promised to send the next day to an old friend for her bazaar; and as Beatrice was reading aloud a book which interested her very much, she was glad to remain in the comfortable chair by the fire.

When the old cuckoo-clock on the stairs struck twelve, Mrs. Dronington started up, ashamed to find how late it was, for since the departure of the guests they had kept much earlier hours, and as she concluded

that the servants had all gone to bed, she proceeded to put on the fire-guard, and take off some pieces of wood.

“Who is that?” exclaimed Beatrice, as she heard the door open at the farther end of the long room.

“No one,” said Mrs. Dronington. “You must fancy it; they are all gone to bed. The only good point about those foreign servants is, they do seem to like early hours.”

“I heard the door open, I am certain,” said Beatrice, looking towards the farther end, which was almost dark, for the light of two candles scarcely reached half-way. “See, look!” she said, in a voice almost inarticulate with terror, clutching her grandmother’s arm.

Mrs. Dronington looked in the direction she pointed to, and distinctly saw the figure of a woman cross the room in a dark brown dress, and approach the deep bay window. At the farther end of the bay the figure

turned, and fronted them for a moment or two.

It was the face of an elderly woman—almost preternaturally old, the lines in it were so angular, and so strongly marked, even by that dim light; and its ashy paleness contrasted in an unearthly manner with a pair of wild and piercing eyes, which almost seemed to flash fire out of the darkness upon them.

The figure stood there for a moment, then turned suddenly and vanished in the dimness of the farther end. Again the door opened and closed, and Beatrice's quick ear heard footsteps pass along the passage at the back of the drawing-room.

For some moments they both seemed too much alarmed to stir; but soon Mrs. Drington said,

“Let us follow it; maybe somebody has got in—some thief or mad woman. Come, quick!”

They took up their bed-room candles,

and leaving the drawing-room, passed along the passage which led to the foot of the oak staircase. As they went up, they fancied that they heard the door of the burnt room open and shut.

“Oh! grandmamma, don’t let us follow her there. I cannot go there at this time of night,” said the trembling Beatrice.

The next moment they distinctly heard the crying as of a child in pain, and when they reached the landing, they distinctly saw a light shining under the door of the burnt room, and through the chinks of it. Mrs. Dronington was resolved to examine into this strange appearance, and pressed forward to open the door, but to her astonishment she found it locked.

“It is always kept locked,” whispered Beatrice, shivering. “How could the figure have entered there? If she did, it must be the ghost. Do—do—do come away to our own rooms.”

“Stay,” said the courageous old lady.

“I will not stir as long as the light remains.”

The next moment it suddenly disappeared, and simultaneously a blast of cold wind blew out their own candles, and the door of the room was heard in the darkness to open and shut with a loud bang.

The terrified Beatrice afterwards declared that she felt a cold hand pass over her face, as if it were feeling her features, and she sank down fainting on the floor. Mrs. Dronington called loudly for help, and endeavoured to raise her grand-daughter. At last her maid heard her cries, and the French cook also came running down the upper stairs, both of them in their night gear.

At that moment a loud cry from Lady Lillyford's room was heard, and on hastening there, they found her sitting up in her bed in hysterics, and it was some time before she could explain the cause of her alarm. By degrees they discovered that she had been awakened suddenly by the

cry of a child, which had seemed close to the head of her bed, and looking up in great terror, she saw a figure in brown grinning horribly at her between the curtains, and staring full in her face with piercing, fiery eyes.

“It must have been a ghost,” said Lady Lillyford. “I never saw a living face of such ghastly paleness. I am sure the eyes were burning red-hot coals—they quite seemed to scorch me. I tried to call out, and I believe I fainted. Oh! get me up—I cannot stay in this room another minute; I should go mad. I cannot get the face out of my head.”

As soon as Lady Lillyford had partially dressed, had made herself up comfortably in Beatrice’s room, and was somewhat pacified, Mrs. Dronington ordered the burnt room to be opened, the men-servants called up, and directed them to search all over the house and garden.

Every part of the house was well secured,

all the outer doors were locked, neither did it appear that any one of them had been broken open. No trace of any intruder was to be found. It was true that the bolt of the glass door leading from the library into the conservatory was found to have been pushed back, and the butler declared he had bolted it before he went to bed. Still, the conservatory itself was locked, and no one from the outside could have pushed back the bolt. Therefore, Mrs. Dronington began reluctantly to think, as everyone else did, that the woman in brown was a supernatural appearance.

While Mrs. Dronington was causing these searches to be made, Beatrice was sitting by her mother's bedside, endeavouring to calm her fears. But she found this no easy task, for it sometimes happens that those people who have the least fear or belief in supernatural appearances become the most alarmed when a conviction of their possibility is forced upon their minds. Lady Lillyford

declared it was quite impossible she could remain another night at Oakhampton, and that her mother must allow her to go to her house in Wimpole Street, until Sir Charles had been persuaded to take a house for the season in London.

This was the only idea that seemed to tranquillise her fears, and Beatrice began to see that it would probably be necessary for her mother's health. So she did not oppose the plan, although she regretted deeply that her residence in a place which she had grown to love better than any other, should be brought to this sudden end. Her tears flowed fast at the thought, and the idea of leaving the place where Elfrida Somerton was living, without even having once seen her, was most painful.

The day had begun to dawn when Mrs. Dronington returned from her search, and the investigation she had caused to be made in the garden and shrubberies to see if any person could be concealed there. She fully

expected that this alarm would put a "finishing stroke," as she said, to her daughter's dislike to the old country place, and was not surprised at her determination to leave it that very day. So she lay down to rest for a couple of hours, and then wrote a note to Mrs. Somerton to explain the motive of her daughter's sudden departure, and express the regret she felt at leaving Oakhampton without seeing them again, more particularly as she had never succeeded in opening the Indian cabinet. But she promised to tell Sir Charles, when she met him in London, the reason for wishing to open it, and induce him to consent that Mrs. Somerton should inspect it herself while the family were away.

CHAPTER XIX.

Suspense.

THERE are few real trials so difficult to bear with cheerfulness as suspense. I mean that the actual certainty of a misfortune obliges us, after the first blow, to bear it with some kind of philosophy or resignation, and make the best of it; but the uncertain, the vague, untangible fears and apprehensions caused by a vivid imagination when a series of circumstances seem to point at, without forming a real cause for sorrow, produce a fluctuation of hope and fear that undermines cheerfulness.

Elfrida Somerton was becoming gradually depressed, in spite of all her efforts to be grateful for the numerous blessings she pos-

sessed. She sought more than ever to find enjoyment in their picturesque and comfortable old house, and in her endeavour to promote the happiness of those around her. But she inherited her mother's sensitive and delicate organization, and this made it more difficult for her to bear up against grief.

On the morning after the alarm at Oakhampton, described in the last chapter, Elfri-da awoke with a feeling of more than usual depression, which took the form of a kind of vague presentiment that her undefined fears and anxieties would now assume some tangible form. Her mother observed her listless and yet anxious gaze as she sat down at her drawing-table in the bay window after breakfast, and looked out on the road where the postman came about that time.

They did not receive many letters, for most of the friends they had been intimate with were living abroad, and they had but few relations in England. But the postman often came up to their door with proof-

sheets, as Mrs. Somerton was bringing out a book. That day, however, he passed along the road without coming up the little walk to the hall-door, and Elfrida could scarcely repress a tear, for she fancied a letter must come from Gratz or Hohenstein that day.

Her mother saw her disappointment, but said nothing; only pointed out a passage in a book she was reading, which she thought would interest her daughter, and perhaps change the current of her thoughts. But before she began to read it they saw a servant in the Lillyford livery come up the walk with a note in his hand. It was Mrs. Dronington's hastily-written farewell. Her account of the reason for this sudden departure was so confused, that they could scarcely make head or tail of it.

"See what she says," said Mrs. Somerton, reading out some passages. "'A ghost frightened my daughter and stood between her bed-curtains!—a light under the door of the burnt room, which was locked and

no one in it!—a cold hand over Beatrice's face and made her faint.' What can it all mean? What a pity we cannot see Mrs. Dronington, for she never could describe anything intelligibly in writing. She says at the end that she 'will try to send the key of the Indian cabinet when she sees Sir Charles in London.'"

"Then we shall never see Beatrice any more," was the principal thought which Elfrida's already depressed mind gathered from the confused note.

"I should so like to have heard what impression the old place and this thoroughly English scenery made upon her; whether she had enjoyed it as much—as much as I ought and might have done."

"I have no doubt she has," said Mrs. Somerton; "for though extremely undeveloped and untrained, she has the kind of nature to be impressed advantageously by English scenery. She may have, in a far less degree than you have, some little feel-

ing for an absent person; and if she cares for no one else, I have no doubt that her walks under the fine old oaks and among the fern-clad dells of the beautiful park have developed it, if the object were at all worthy of her thoughts. But see, the sun is shining now and the rain over, so let us put on our bonnets and go to Peggy, and show her and her brother this strange note. Perhaps they may have heard more, and can tell what is likely to have frightened Lady Lillyford and her daughter so much."

"You mean whether it is like the apparition which is said to have been seen before? Oh! yes, do let us go."

They found Mr. Mordaunt and his sister at home, but there was something so embarrassed in the manner of both, that it made them feel that their visit was ill-timed.

Elfrida fancied that it was something connected with herself, from the anxious looks Mr. Mordaunt stealthily directed towards her, though he tried to look indifferent.

He was a bad actor, and the post that morning *had* brought a letter concerning his ward, which surprised and indeed vexed him beyond measure. Peggy had been almost as much annoyed by it, but her happier temperament and robust nature enabled her to bear it with more apparent calmness—not indifference, for she too looked on Elfrida with anxious fondness; and then, thinking that perhaps her brother might wish to tell Mrs. Somerton what he had heard, she drew Elfrida into an adjoining room, under pretext of showing her some frocks she had just finished for the school-children.

“So there has been a sad to-do up at the Hall, I find,” said Peggy; “the old story, I suppose, of a brown figure gliding about in dark corners, and lights seen in the burnt room. I really don’t know what to think about it. In some cases of well-attested ghost stories there seemed to have been some use in the supernatural appearance. But unless there is, I cannot believe that

the spirits of those who are gone should be permitted to come and frighten people out of their senses."

"Yet in all ages, from the time of the witch of Endor, they seem to have appeared," said Elfrida; "and after all, are we to be the judges of whether there is a use in it or not? I am inclined to think the idea mentioned by Plato may be the true one, that guilty souls are allowed for a time to haunt the scenes of their crimes."

They continued to speak on this subject for some minutes, but they both felt that the under-current of their thoughts was absorbed by something else, and they spoke mechanically, as it were, merely for the sake of keeping up some kind of conversation. At last Elfrida could bear the suspense no longer, and she said,

"I am certain you and your brother have heard some bad news. Do tell me what it is—something that concerns Mr.—Edward Luscombe—I am certain."

Peggy looked perplexed for a minute, and then said, "Well, I'm always for knowing the worst of everything, and so I told Henry when we read the letter, and—and—but your mother had better tell you. She could do it better than I can, and she has read the letter by this time. Wait here and I'll fetch her, for you should be alone together."

There was bad news, then, and it concerned *him*.

During the few moments that elapsed between the departure of Peggy and her mother's entrance into the room, Elfrida's imagination had ranged over every possible and impossible subject for woe. The agony that seems to be concentrated into a short space of time when we have proof that a vaguely apprehended misfortune has become certain, while yet we are in ignorance of the real facts, such suffering is almost beyond any positive known woe.

Mrs. Somerton's first words were,

"I don't believe it, and I will not. There

must be some horrible mistake. There, you may read the letter; you must know, my dear, dear child, what has been said or supposed, but I will not believe it; nor will you, I am sure; and this, our unbelief, will be our only comfort."

"But, mamma, whatever it is, I see Mr. Mordaunt and his sister are evidently miserable; how and why, then, can we disbelieve it?" said Elfrida, who was more apprehensive, or rather, as it was apparently her own self that was more immediately concerned, she could afford to be so. For there is often a sort of self-justification in the disbelief we accord to the calamities of our friends, whereas our conscience prompts us to face the worst concerning ourselves, and perhaps, in order to avoid future disappointment, we unconsciously exaggerate any present misfortune.

So Elfrida *would* face the worst, and therefore asked to see the letter which had caused this as yet undefined misery.

In order to understand better than she and her friends could do, the purport of Mr. Sterndale's letter, we will look in upon the splendid *fête* which was given at the Castle of Hohenstein on the evening before the intended marriage of its heiress.

CHAPTER XX.

A Mystery.

THE same night on which Mrs. Somerton dreamt her strange dream about Oakhampton Hall, the grand ball took place at Hohenstein Castle, or rather (as had been arranged) in one of the caves beneath its base. The Graf had placed the carrying out of the *fête* in the hands of Cunigunda, at her urgent request, and certainly she had more than fulfilled the high expectations already raised.

The uneven ground had been boarded over, and lamps of every hue illuminated the brilliant roof and columns, formed of the white incrustations from the roof, which, meeting those rising up from the ground,

produced a variety of graceful forms, resembling Corinthian and other pillars. Behind one large stalactite lights were placed, and being transparent, it shone with a pale pink light, producing a beautiful and magical effect. Garlands of flowers formed a boundary in some places; in others distant vistas, illuminated by chains of coloured lamps, stretched as far, apparently, as the eye could reach; in others curtains of tapestry, or of Aubusson, closed up cavernous depths, which, if left unscreened, would have spoiled the composition, and produced a feeling of desolation.

It was truly a scene of enchantment, a bit of fairyland, a realization of some of the most graceful dreams of German imagination, such as De la Motte Fouqué loved to paint, and by which he has entranced grown-up children of all nations.

Some of the distant vistas were bordered with what appeared like strings of brilliant emeralds, others with rubies or sapphires;

and they were strung in festoons, with a larger light, that resembled a diamond, as a centre brooch.

In fact, the effect was like splendid necklaces of precious stones, set in every kind of graceful device. Some appeared to culminate in a fanciful and intricate pattern, beneath which seats covered with velvets of different colours were placed. From these more open, and, as it were, public seats, others placed in shade, and only partly illumined, might be discerned in the boundless background. These Cunigunda called "*Conversationsen-Sitzen*," and pointed them out to many a young pair as they passed up and down the broader walks, while her maliciously-speaking eyes seemed to say, "Those are flirting places."

In some of these seats the light was shaded by a trellis-work of fragrant flowers, which produced a kind of chequered shade, and emitted the most delicious perfumes.

Mr. Sterndale was moving slowly along,

contemplating this remarkable scene, when he came upon Edward Luscombe, who appeared to be similarly occupied, only he was standing still.

“Hanging about the corners again,” said Mr. Sterndale. “You remind me of the old story one has heard of about the ‘elegant extracts,’ as they were called, in the days of the Prince Regent. ‘The 10th don’t dance.’ Well, I don’t wonder at it, to-night, anyhow, for this really is like a scene from the ‘Arabian Nights.’”

“And the whole thing is wonderfully well managed,” said Edward. “This place would be as cold and damp as a cellar, if it were not for those charcoal-burners behind the curtains, that form a screen of warm air, while the smoke goes away into the caverns beyond. It must have cost a mint of money.”

“Well, I’ve done nothing but stare as yet, and not exclusively at the fairy scene either. I have been watching that cousin with the sixth-century-sounding name — Cunigunda.

There is a strange kind of power in her—the power of an unscrupulous will, and a chameleon-like manifestation of good and evil. I should advise all whom it may concern—and, not to be vague, I should advise *you*—to be careful of her.”

“But I haven’t a penny,” interrupted Edward Luscombe.

“She could make a fool of you all the same,” said Mr. Sterndale, without any variation of tone.

“Not *now*—that is, it’s out of the question.”

“Well, keep it so, that’s all. But it doesn’t seem to be out of the question with Fairleigh. Look at him being made a cat’s-paw and an extra string to her bow.”

“Well, the *only* string I should say; surely the Count and Dorina are safe from her now, seeing that their wedding-day is to-morrow.”

“I trust it may be so,” said Mr. Sterndale, shrugging his shoulders. “But I cannot get rid of the feeling that something dreadful is

coming; perhaps an earthquake. I am sure there is no knowing what may not happen at any moment, in a place like this, where there are all kinds of horrible chasms under one's feet—gloomy abysses ready to swallow one up. It is so like the German mind, to have fixed on a mystic place like this palace of the genii, for a dance.”

Edward Luscombe started, but not at Mr. Sterndale's words.

“Look there!” he said. “Did you see the expression of Cunigunda's face just then, as her cousin and Count Rossi passed her? Well, if ever the green-eyed monster——”

“Of course I did, and I have seen it in her before. She is of the stuff they make sensation dramas of. Depend upon it, she's a queerer customer than you have ever come across yet. See if she does not make the Count, who is going to be married to-morrow morning, dance with her now—I am convinced that she is going to do it, and very much against his will, too.”

Mr. Sterndale was right. A few minutes afterwards Cunigunda went up to the bridegroom (as he is called in Germany even before the ceremony takes place), and with her playful "One dance with me, Count, this last night, and Dorina be our *vis-à-vis*," she carried him off triumphantly.

This conversation took place towards the end of the evening, and some of the lamps in the remoter avenues, which were smaller than the rest, had begun to fail. It was soon after one of the most spirited dances, and numerous couples were pacing along the avenues, or sought in their comparative retirement a cherished place for rest amid the flowery bowers.

The farther end of the chain of emeralds that led from the main ball-room was quite extinguished, and suddenly loud cries were heard in that direction. Count Rossi had just finished his dance with Cunigunda, and they were standing nearer the centre column, in a most conspicuous place. On hearing these

cries they both uttered exclamations of horror, and the first words of Cunigunda were, "Mein Gott, wo ist Dorina!" Already the Count had rushed off in the direction of the cries and extinguished lights, followed by many others, but Cunigunda remained where she had been standing, and Mr. Sterndale remarked what he fancied to be a triumphant look on her face. But the next moment she began to call out again, and then followed the rest towards the spot.

Mr. Sterndale was determined not to lose sight of her, and he thought she perceived his intentions, for she began to address her utterances of fear and anxiety more particularly to him, and her "Mein Gott, wo ist Dorina!" sounded more pitiful than ever.

He stopped her suddenly, looking full into her face, while he laid his hand on her shoulder, and asked, "Why do you mention her name more than any other? What reason have you to fear most for her?"

"It is—it is because," she said, hesitating

and turning pale, "because I saw her last going towards the emerald avenue, leaning on young Mr. Luscombe's arm."

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Sterndale, while a terrible suspicion, or rather two or three suspicions, flashed across his mind. He hurried off in the direction of the extinguished lamps, and consequently lost sight of Cunigunda.

A scene of the utmost confusion ensued, for the whole chain of emerald lights were now extinguished, and most of those persons who ran towards the spot whence the cries proceeded were in total darkness. Except in the long alleys, which had been boarded over, not only was the ground uneven, but deep fissures and chasms occasionally appeared, into which a false step might precipitate anyone to a great depth. Soon, however, torches were brought by the Graf's order, and he came down from the banquetting-hall, where he had been among some of his guests at supper, as soon as he heard

that an accident had happened in the cave. Several persons had fallen down in their efforts to follow, and at the farther end, where the lights had first gone out, some of the guests had fallen a considerable depth, and were much hurt, but no trace of Dorina or Edward Luscombe could be discovered. The terrified Graf and Count Rossi seized a couple of torches, and went in different directions, while they sent others into all the known alleys and intricacies of the cave. At this moment Mr. Sterndale again saw Cunigunda, and fancied that there was a look of greater anxiety on her face, but whether caused by real fright or the apprehended failure of some diabolical plan, he could not determine.

Soon afterwards all the brilliant illuminations in the cave went out, and only a few torches were left to throw a dim light on the terrible scene. Mr. Sterndale could see that Cunigunda was ringing her hands with dismay, but she clung to Arthur Fairleigh,

implored him not to leave her, or she would be sure to fall into some of the dreadful depths. Mr. Sterndale saw that the crowd rather impeded than otherwise the search for the missing 'couple, and suggested that the best plan would be for all the guests to leave the cave, and endeavour to send down more people with torches.

Cunigunda caught at the idea, and implored Fairleigh to escort her up to the castle. She said that Dorina's old nurse would be in dreadful anxiety, and she might be of use to her. Again Mr. Sterndale determined, as far as possible, to keep his eye on Cunigunda, and followed her up the winding stairs; but she soon left Mr. Fairleigh, and retreated into the private apartments of the family, where it was impossible for anyone to penetrate.

No one thought of going to bed that night, and although nearly all the guests had left the cave, they remained in the banqueting-hall, which was not far from its

entrance, in order to obtain the first intelligence, when those parties who were searching should return.

Towards morning the Graf and his brother (Cunigunda's father) returned, muddy, wet, and bruised, but their search had been unsuccessful, and the Graf was now determined to proceed to the cave of Adelsberg, with which, it was said, there was a communication from those under the Castle, and cause search to be made in every direction there. He had left some servants with torches in different parts underneath, and the Count Rossi was still searching in another direction. The Graf took a compass with him, in order to ascertain the south-eastern direction, in case they found avenues from one set of caves to the other, and sent down a party to start from the caves underneath, and, if possible, meet those coming from the Adelsberg caves.

Just as the miserable father was leaving the Castle with Mr. Sterndale on this his

most uncertain expedition, one of the gardeners rushed into the hall, and said he feared that their search would be useless, because he was now sure that the two persons he had seen pass along the south terrace walk in the moonlight just before midnight, were the Gräfin and Herr Luscombe. They were walking very quietly towards the stables. On being asked whether he saw their faces, and was sure it was the Gräfin, he said he could not tell, but that when he heard she could not be found anywhere, he thought it might be possible.

“Still,” he said, “it seemed so unlikely the Gräfin should be going towards the stables at that time of night, he would not have thought of mentioning it, if Frau Wittenheimer, Gräfin Cunigunda’s maid, had not said she saw them from her window, and was sure it must have been the Gräfin, because she had on a white veil and a pink dress.”

“Have any horses been taken from the

stables?" inquired the Graf, who was by this time so bewildered that he was ready to fear or believe anything; and too feverishly anxious to wait for an answer, he hurried there himself. There he found, to his dismay, that two horses had been taken away without any of the stable people's knowledge, and that they could be nowhere found.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Search.

MESSENGERS were now sent in all directions to inquire of the country people whether anyone had been seen riding away from the Castle. But still the Graf proceeded to Adelsberg, because it seemed to be the general impression that his daughter had been seen entering the emerald avenue, not long before those fearful cries were heard which caused such alarm among the company.

Count Rossi had not yet returned from his search in the cave, but as the Graf had met him twice in the course of their search, and Jägers were stationed at intervals with torches in the principal passages, they did not fear for his safety, and the distracted

lover had declared his intention never to give up the search till he had found Dorina.

On the departure of the Graf for Adelsberg, his brother returned to the cave, and the old steward wisely sent refreshments down for the Count and all those who were determined to prolong their search, also restoratives for the Gräfin, if they were so fortunate as to find her alive. But as fourteen hours had now passed since she disappeared, few among the anxious throng could venture to indulge a hope that if she were really in the cave she could be alive.

Dorina was loved by all the retainers and peasants on her father's vast estates, and bitter were the lamentations uttered by all who heard of the catastrophe. That she should have died in some dark recess of those vast caves was fearful to think of, and yet the other supposition—that she had fled with the English youth on the very day before she was to wed the Count, seemed still more revolting.

Mr. Sterndale and Arthur Fairleigh went down into the cave, after the departure of the Graf for Adelsberg, with the party who had determined to examine the emerald passage and its surrounding outlets, in order to ascertain, if possible, the origin of the cries of distress which had perhaps induced Dorina and Edward Luscombe to hasten on beyond the parts that were illuminated. They might have taken another turn, and thus lost themselves in the darkness. They found that about twenty yards beyond, and on the left of the flowery seat which terminated the emerald avenue, the floor descended suddenly to a much lower level, and there was a narrow entrance to a much smaller cavern. This lower cave had three small outlets, and Mr. Sterndale and Mr. Fairleigh determined to pursue the centre one, because it was lower, and because it appeared to descend more precipitously than the other two.

As the Adelsberg caves were on a lower

level than those of Hohenstein, they thought that the lower they kept the more likely they were to reach them. As they proceeded, they searched on the ground in hopes of finding footmarks that might serve as a guide. In one place Mr. Sterndale fancied he saw the print of a small foot. Again, further on, there was another, but no larger one; therefore, if this was Dorina's, they considered she must have been alone at that time. Soon afterwards these passages became narrower, and so low that they could scarcely stand upright; but as they proceeded farther, it opened out into a cave so large and high, that though they held up their torches for some time, no boundaries were visible. Keeping close to one side they went on, and to their dismay discovered a great number of outlets; and here the droppings from the roof formed numerous pools, so that no footsteps could be discovered.

They then began reluctantly to acknow-

ledge that a further search could lead to no good result, and fearing to lose themselves irrecoverably, they selected one of the outlets that led in a southerly direction. As no footsteps could here be discovered, it was evident that the people who had been sent in search of Dorina had not penetrated in this direction.

Soon afterwards, however, they met Count Rossi and a large party of gentlemen and servants, and informed him of the small footprint they had seen in the narrow passage. The Count of course wished to go and search in that direction, and the two Englishmen accompanied him. But they found it impossible to remember which of the numerous outlets from the large cave which contained pools of water, was the one by which they had entered it. In vain they searched in all directions; no foot-prints, nor even any passage so low as the one where they had seen it, could be found.

The Count had not heard the report of

his betrothed having been seen on the terrace with Edward Luscombe, but one of the party had, and being either shy or tired, made it known suddenly. The unhappy bridegroom treated the report at first as an impossibility; then gradually he seemed to become stunned by the news—so much so that, though an Italian, he was outwardly quite calm, and walked back to the Castle without speaking a word. His eyes had a glazed and vacant look; his cheeks were ashy pale; he walked as one in a dream, and the party accompanied him in dead silence.

It was late when they reached the Castle. The Graf had not returned from Adelsberg, nor had anything been heard of the two persons who were said to have left the Castle on horseback the night before.

Another night of terrible suspense was passed by the inhabitants of the Castle. Count Rossi seemed overwhelmed with grief, and shutting himself up in his own room, refused to see any one.

The next morning the Graf returned home, much injured by a fall in the Adelsberg cave, which broke his arm and bruised him severely. That day Mr. Sterndale wrote the letters to his old friend which caused such woe at Oakhampton, for as three days had passed and no intelligence of the missing pair had arrived, there was every reason to fear either that they had perished in the cave, or that the gardener's report was true.

The latter alternative Mr. Sterndale was most reluctant to accept; in fact, he believed it to be almost an impossibility; yet he thought it necessary to mention all that had been said, and what many even of the inmates of the Castle seemed gradually to accept as the truth.

This was the news which Elfrida heard at the Rectory, and in the desolation of her heart she scarcely knew which alternative to choose,—whether to believe that he must have died in the cave while his heart still beat for her alone, or—or, no—the alterna-

tive was unendurable. In that respect her mother was right, she thought. It could not be.

Mr. Sterndale concluded his letter by saying that if he heard any fresh intelligence he would immediately write, and in a postscript he added that messengers had been sent to Gratz as well as the neighbouring towns where Edward Luscombe was known, but no one had heard anything of him.

CHAPTER XXII.

Is he Guilty?

TWICE Mrs. Somerton and her daughter read through the letter together which contained all this news, and at the end each gazed wistfully into the countenance of the other, as if to ascertain the chief impression produced by it. The second perusal seemed to have a more crushing effect on Elfrida than the first; and Mrs. Somerton persuaded her to return home without seeing the good Rector and his sister, for she knew that in the hour of newly-awakened grief no consolation can be found in any human sympathy. So she led her quietly out of the room, and Mr. Mor-daunt and his sister, feeling that it would

be best to leave them alone, would not even venture into the little hall, but sat apparently reading with great attention their several books till they heard the hall door closed softly. Even then they did not look towards the casement, through which they might have seen the mother and daughter pass along the gravel-walk; for to minds cast in such a sensitive mould as theirs, there is something so sacred and hallowed about those who suffer, that they would feel it a kind of desecration to intrude upon them by word or look.

Neither Mr. Mordaunt nor his sister spoke for some minutes, but as Peggy was the first to discover that she had not turned over a page of her book since she read Mr. Sterndale's letter, her practical turn of mind induced her to shut it up, and take out of her basket some work she was doing for the poor people.

Mr. Mordaunt, not having that kind of resource for his hands, but startled into self-

consciousness by seeing her change of employment, said abruptly,

“Well, I think I shall walk over to Ferncote Hall, and try to see the Miss Fairleighs. It occurs to me that their brother, who was with Mr. Sterndale in his search through the caves, might have written to them, and possibly thrown some light on this mysterious affair.”

“Oh! yes, do,” said Peggy, while her face brightened. “Yes, he might perhaps say more about that foot-print. I am so anxious to know that he is dead. I mean—I mean—you know what I mean—that dear girl—I am sure it would be so much easier for her to get over it than if he had run away with that Gräfin, as they call her, just on the eve of her marriage, too. And they all seemed to think her so good—too good for this world, you know, Mr. Sterndale said in one of his letters, and that she was like the picture of some beautiful saint painted by those old masters. I

seemed quite to love her from his description."

"Well, I'll go, then."

"But won't you have some dinner first? for it's a good three miles' walk, and you wouldn't be back till quite late. No? But perhaps the young ladies will be out; if so, mind you leave word to ask them to come and see me to-morrow; they are so good and kind, and seem to like coming here into this little old room. And Miss Rosa said she wants to come and make a sketch of it the first bright day. She likes these old carved gables and mullioned windows, and she says the church tower composes so well. I don't know exactly what that means, for I thought it applied chiefly to music, and I used to think it was musical airs that were composed—and I never could draw a line."

And so Peggy ran on, while her brother was putting on his great-coat, for the day was intensely cold; and he lingered a little

over the operation, for he was glad to see that her elastic mind was experiencing a kind of under-current of relief in speaking about indifferent subjects.

“And what are you going to amuse yourself with while I am away?” he said.

“Well, I think I shall go and read to old Dame Farrant, the old housemaid—I am fit for nothing else; and then I will go into Mrs. Coles’s, and sit with her for awhile, and send her niece out for a walk. I’ll take my work there. Oh! never fear, I shan’t catch her fever; you know those close rooms don’t affect me at all.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Advantages of Graceful Dancing.

MR. MORDAUNT found the two Miss Fairleighs were at home, and as they play rather an important part in the future history of Beatrice Lillyford, we must pause awhile to make the reader acquainted with them, and with their home.

Mr. Mordaunt had been in their house several times, for they had come to take possession of Ferncote early in the previous November, and now it was March.

Ferncote was much the same character of house as Oakhampton Hall, and, strange to say, had remained equally unspoiled. It was entirely of stone. The south front looked on the old terraced garden, which

sloped down to the lake ; on the other side groves of oaks and beeches sheltered it from the north wind, and clothed the base of some steep chalky downs, beyond which stretched a broad moor, covered with gorse and purple heather.

Ferncote had no long gallery like that at Oakhampton. Here the great hall was used as the drawing-room, the inlaid floor was covered with Turkey carpets, the massive high stone mullioned windows were filled with old stained glass, except the lower panes, which looked over the garden and lake ; the high dark oak roof was decorated with the armorial quarterings of the Fairleighs, and the stone walls were hung with numerous full-length portraits of their ancestors, many of them in the quaint dresses of the reigns of Elizabeth and James. Two great fireplaces at either end diffused an agreeable warmth throughout its great extent.

The oak panelling which covered the

walls half way up was enlivened here and there with an Indian or inlaid cabinet, whose tops glistened with china ; while settees, covered with old stamped leather or tapestry, and a row of ebony chairs inlaid with ivory, which were one of the lions of the neighbourhood, were ranged at intervals on either side of this beautiful room.

Mr. Mordaunt found the elder Miss Fairleigh seated in a high-backed oak chair near the fire, reading aloud; and in the large bay window close by, which formed a little room of itself, her sister was busily occupied mounting some of her summer and autumn sketches. The eldest Miss Fairleigh was nearly twenty years older than her sister, and had been brought up in what was then called the Evangelical or serious school, by her mother. Some of the severest opinions or prejudices of that sect had become in a great measure modified when she was left, by her widowed mother's death, sole guardian to her young sister of ten years old,

and a brother who was just going to college. She could not help liking to see them dance, and could not imagine any harm could come of it; but the idea of a regular ball, beginning at the hour when one ought to go to bed, and lasting all night, keeping up servants and others who could have nothing to do but gamble or drink, was alike repugnant to her early prejudices and to her practical common-sense. She had had many offers, and she was now scarcely thirty-eight, but had never yet been induced to say "Yes;" and whenever remonstrated with by intimate friends on her obduracy, would reply that she was quite certain she never was meant to go in double harness.

"It is very good of you to come so far on such a cold day," were the words that greeted Mr. Mordaunt on his being ushered into the large room. "I hope you will not feel it cold here," continued the eldest Miss Fairleigh; "but my sister and myself are such lovers of space, that we take every op-

portunity of persuading ourselves it is better for the pictures and books to sit here principally, and keep up good fires. Otherwise, until my brother comes home, most people would think the library or small drawing-room good enough for us."

"I am quite of your opinion," said Mr. Mordaunt; "size and space are to me one of the greatest luxuries; our ancestors understood this, and most of their dwellings have at least one large hall or room, where one can breathe in comfort, free alike from stuffiness and draughts. But you mention your brother. Have you heard from him lately?"

"Not for ages," said Rosa, the youngest. "I cannot think what he is about; we have been quite uneasy. The last letter was written just after he had arrived at Hohenstein; that would be a fortnight now, and he is seldom so long in writing."

"Then you have not heard of the great catastrophe?" said Mr. Mordaunt. "I

hoped he could have thrown some light upon it."

"Catastrophe!—no, indeed; do tell us," eagerly said both the Miss Fairleighs.

Mr. Mordaunt then related, as nearly as he could remember, the contents of Mr. Sterndale's letter; and when he had ended, Miss Fairleigh said,

"I never heard of anything more painful, for the survivors—the poor Graf von Hohenstein and the bridegroom; how terrible must be their sufferings! Well, it is another of one of the *many* dreadful things that happen in ball-rooms. How people can encourage such things passes my comprehension."

"But you do not object to dancing altogether?" inquired Mr. Mordaunt, with a half smile.

"No, I can't say but that I like to see Rosa dance, for she does it well; for instance, to enliven an evening, when a number of young people are together—I think

it very useful ; it warms their feet, and gets the blood out of their noses before they go to bed. But driving fifteen or twenty miles to begin and end with nothing else but dancing, and to keep themselves up all night, and be fit for nothing for two days after, is what I do object to, and so I *hope* you do too." This latter sentence was addressed with a pointed emphasis to Mr. Mordaunt, as much as to say, " You do not know your duty as a clergyman if you do not." " At any rate," she added, " Rosa has promised to gratify me in one thing—she will not valse or galop. I am perfectly certain that I should want to box the ears of any man, except Arthur, who should dare to put his arm round her waist and spin her round *nolens volens* ; it is an impertinence I cannot and will not stand, and has spoiled the manners of all the young ladies of this generation."

" My sister Peggy would agree with you about waltzing, and so would Mrs.

Somerton," said Mr. Mordaunt; "they're old-fashioned enough to think that all gracefulness departed with the minuet."

"Yes, I am sure it did," said Miss Fairleigh.

"I must say I often wish," said Mr. Mordaunt, "that some of the old *fêtes* for our village folk could be revived again, as when they 'danced beneath the chequered shade' in old times. In these days holidays are spent at the ale-house, and relaxation, having no legitimate vent, is apt to lead to sin."

"Perhaps you will accomplish it in time," said Miss Fairleigh.

"Never; I am an old man now," said he; "I belong to a past generation, and shall disappear with its last relics. Going over to Paris in ten hours is an idea that to me savours more of pain than pleasure. When I see the railroad invading our rustic valleys I can sympathize with the sorrow of the red man when he views the smoky factories of the 'Pale face' profaning what were once,

so short a time ago, his regal hunting-grounds."

"Yet you have done a great deal towards restoring old customs and old pleasures," said Miss Fairleigh; "they tell me the music you have at your church is wonderful for a village. Rosa is always wanting me to go there on Sundays. Ours certainly is very bad—the poor children have no idea of time or tune, but we hope to improve them gradually."

"Yes," said Rosa, "and you have what our poor people call a 'comedy,' haven't you? All the various old instruments which used to be in village churches—clarionets, and bassoons, and flutes; and we are told you have contrived to make them all play good music in time and tune, so that it is quite a beautiful orchestra."

Mr. Mordaunt drew a deep sigh, and musing, said,

"Yes, it is pretty well, but you know I am a bit of a violoncello player myself, and

therefore I have worked them all at it in the evenings twice a week ; ay, and it has taken me thirty long years to accomplish it. When I came there first I found the ‘comedy’ in full force, as they called it; and intolerable though it was, I wished to preserve if possible to the poor people such a source of pleasure as music can be made, and develop in them the talent which the people of Old England had in former times. So I began to instruct them. Some were offended and threw it up, others could not be induced to practise, but at last I conquered all obstacles, and, aided by one or two of undoubted talent, we have at last made it what it is.”

“Thirty years to accomplish it!” said Rosa, looking up with a kind of wonder depicted in her face. “That is indeed the work of a life.”

“One of the few and imperfect works of a long life,” he said, with a kind of sadness; “thirty years ago next Lady-day Peggy and I first came to Oakhampton ; I was five-and-

forty, a man who loved nothing so well as books, and she a buxom lass of five-and-twenty. Well, well, the world has indeed taken a twirl all round its axis since then. I often rub my eyes and ask where I am ; the things that happen now outside of the quiet valley of Oakhampton are so unlike what used to happen when I first left the busy life of a town, and took up my abode there, that I sometimes feel like one of the seven sleepers suddenly awoke up to find a new generation and a new set of things and of ideas."

"But to return to the choir. You have singers too, have you not?" said Rosa.

"Yes, and I had a couple of splendid voices in my choir, but they left the village."

"And do you approve of the operas too?" inquired Miss Fairleigh. "Oh, Mr. Mordaunt, I see you do. But what do you say to the ballet?"

"As I never saw one, I can say nothing about it."

“And you have painted glass and flowers too in your church, I hear?”

“Yes, I am very glad to bring whatever beauty I can into the house of God. It pleases my poor people, and——”

Miss Fairleigh shook her head, but said nothing. There was a silence for a few moments or two, for Mr. Mordaunt was too shy to continue speaking when he saw the impossibility of convincing his opponent, and as yet he had not readiness enough to change the subject. Fortunately Rosa came to the rescue, by inquiring about the family at Oakhampton.

“I believe that while we are speaking they are actually on their way up to London,” said he. “Lady Lillyford was frightened by a ghost or something last night, and would start off immediately.”

“Oh! how sorry I am,” said Miss Fairleigh. “I have wanted so much to see Beatrice Lillyford. For although they would not call on us, I hoped when my brother

came here they might meet. You know he knew them very intimately at Rome; but I forgot, you are not acquainted with them either, your sister tells me. I have long wished so very much to see Miss Lillyford," said Miss Fairleigh; "and was very nearly coming to your church on purpose, when I heard their family never went there, only to their own little chapel in the Park."

"So you would come there on purpose to see a young lady at church, yet you objected to come for the sake of the music when your sister wished it," said Mr. Mordaunt, with a mixture of quiet irony and amusement.

"Oh! yes, you have caught me there, you see; but—but I had heard so much of her from my brother in his letters. I may as well tell you at once, for I am sure you will not talk about it, he was very much struck with her; and I do so want to know exactly what kind of girl she is."

“You should ask Mrs. Somerton,” said Mr. Mordaunt; “she knew Miss Lillyford intimately abroad, and I believe they liked her extremely.”

“Ah! I am glad of that, for I admire that dear Mrs. Somerton and her pretty, graceful daughter. Rosa, let us drive there to-morrow—I long to hear their impression of Miss Lillyford.”

“Not to-morrow,” said Mr. Mordaunt quickly, and then stopped short, for he remembered that he could give no good reason for this prohibition, and yet he felt convinced that neither mother nor daughter would like to receive visitors during their present state of suspense; but it was necessary to make some excuse, he therefore muttered something about hearing that Mrs. Somerton was very busy correcting the proof-sheets of her new book; “and,” he added, with more confidence, “Miss Somerton is very unwell—quite unfit to see any one.”

“Oh! but she would not mind me, I am sure,” said Rosa. “You have no idea what a good nurse and doctor I am. Ah! you think not, I see. Well, will you let us hear when we may go to see them, for you have no idea of the state of mind we are in about Miss Lillyford. Poor dear Arthur begged us so earnestly to cultivate her acquaintance. He says she has such a fine natural disposition, but has had great disadvantages; and, in fact, with all the best masters, has received no real education at all.”

“Very probable,” said Mr. Mordaunt; “and it has appeared to us quite cruel to deprive her of enjoying the place as well as participating in the duties of country life. Her grandmother told me that she was never so happy before as in the old place, and admires the scenery in the Park more than anything she ever saw all through the course of her travel.”

“Well done!” exclaimed Rosa, clapping her hands with delight. “And so you

know her grandmother—do tell us more.”

“Well, I don’t know that I have anything to tell,” said he. “You know I have never even seen her but once, and that was passing through the village at a distance.”

“How unlucky that her mother kept her so shut up, for I wanted to have told Arthur about her.”

At that moment luncheon was announced, and Mr. Mordaunt rose to take leave.

“You are not going to be so shabby as to run off in this way,” said Louisa. “You must come in and eat a good luncheon, or rather dinner, for we do not dine late while Arthur is away; and then you must let us drive you home afterwards.”

Mr. Mordaunt protested that he was well able to walk, but it was no use. Miss Fairleigh was determined to have her own way.

“It will be a charity to use the horses, they are eating their heads off. Besides, we had intended to bring your sister some of our geraniums this very afternoon, so we

will drive with you, and take our work and drink tea with her and you, if you are not busy."

"That will be kind indeed," said he ;
"and she will be able to tell you better than I can when Mrs. Somerton would be able to see you."

CHAPTER XXIV.

*Peggy thinks that a dozen eyes are required
to correct a Proof-sheet.*

CLAMOROUS grief is generally short-lived, but grief which would last a life-time is oftentimes born dumb. It also not unfrequently happens that people who possess the deepest feelings are the least demonstrative of them, chiefly because the strength which causes acute feeling also produces the self-control necessary to bear calamities with resignation. If the well-meaning Rector had allowed the Miss Fairleighs to call on Mrs. Somerton the next day, as they wished, they would have found both mother and daughter, to all appearance,

much the same as when they saw them before.

Elfrida was somewhat paler, and had been unable to sleep the previous night, but she dressed and came down at the usual hour, and pursued her customary avocations with rather more than wonted punctuality. All great efforts become marked by something of exaggeration. Her grief and anxiety were so intense, and the effort to control them so excessive, that her calmness was necessarily exaggerated, and therefore in a measure betrayed itself. Until she had heard of this positive misfortune, her vague anxiety had made her listless and almost *désœuvrée*. But there was no medium now: the suffering was immediate and tangible, and therefore she must give her whole mind to controlling it. Mrs. Somerton saw this plainly, and fully appreciated the power and self-restraint which a first great sorrow was calling forth in her loved child.

After breakfast Mrs. Somerton saw Peggy

Mordaunt coming up to the door ; her soft and cautious tread was so different from her usually quick and energetic walk, that Mrs. Somerton could scarcely refrain from smiling.

“ You will see that she will send to ask whether we will see her ; in fact, she must have some cogent reason for coming, or she would not venture. Dear girl, thank you for smiling too, that’s right ; yes, go into the hall yourself and bring her in, darling.”

Elfrida soon found herself in Peggy’s expansive arms, and was sobbed over and caressed for a few seconds, but neither of them spoke till Mrs. Somerton came out.

Then Peggy dried her eyes and said, in a hesitating voice, that she should not have ventured to come, only she wished to know how they were.

“ And besides,” said she, “ I thought it might interest you to know of a little romance connected with Ferncote. Mr. Fair-

leigh knew Miss Lillyford abroad, and remembers her still, and his sisters want greatly to ask you both about her."

"It will be a great pleasure to us to tell them," said Mrs. Somerton, "for we both love that dear girl."

"Yes," said Elfrida, "and how delightful it will be if she should become their sister, and live so near us, and then we could see her as often as she likes. And—but did not your brother hear that that Mr. Fairleigh admired poor Dorina's beautiful cousin?"

And the thought that something of the same kind of suffering as she now experienced might be in store for Beatrice made her heart sink.

"Yes, he did," said Peggy. "Oh! dear—oh! dear, what a wicked thing; and to think how blind and perverse that Lady Lillyford was! All this time she has been neglecting those dear affable girls, the sisters of the very man perhaps her daughter cared for. Who knows but that if she had been

neighbourly, as she ought, they would have written to their brother long ago, and told him all about the young lady he admired so much; and then he would have hurried home at once, and would never have been taken so with any other."

"Well, there's no knowing, certainly," she added, on seeing Elfrida's sorrowful face. "'Men are deceivers ever,' as the old song says."

"Have they not heard from their brother since?" inquired Elfrida.

"No, they have not; and that is just what we wanted to inquire yesterday after you left us, in hopes—but they are sure to hear soon, we think, and they will tell us, because," she added hastily—"because they know the young Gräfin is a relation of yours. There is the postman; he must be late to-day, for I thought it was past the time," and Peggy turned to look at some books, that she might not see Elfrida's wist-

ful face as the maid entered the room and laid something on the table.

“No letters, only proofs,” said Mrs. Somerton—“four proofs. We must work hard now; you know it requires two eyes—I mean four, to correct proofs well.”

“A dozen, if they were like mine,” said Peggy, as she looked at the odd marks at the side, and the queries, &c. “Well, to be sure, to think I should be talking here to you, just as I would to anybody, and you a great authoress. So awful! I feel often quite ashamed of myself for not being frightened at you, I do. Well, now, I’ll go; and I may really tell the Miss Fairleighs you will see them to-morrow?”

CHAPTER XXV.

The Permission.

THE next morning's post brought a letter to Mrs. Somerton with the proofs, but they were disappointed to see at the first glance, as it was brought into the room, that there was no foreign post-mark. On closer inspection they descried the clear upright handwriting of Mrs. Dronington. Although they did not expect that it could contain any news that would relieve or compose their anxieties, they read it eagerly, and with a feeling of gratification for any proof of interest from the old lady, to whom they knew that letter-writing was a great effort.

It was a pleasant letter, and contained

the welcome permission from Sir Charles Lillyford to break open the old Indian cabinet, if Mrs. Somerton wished to do so, and expressed a hope that she and her daughter would make any use they chose of the park and gardens while the family were absent. Mrs. Dronington also expressed the regret she knew Sir Charles felt, that his wife had persisted, in depriving herself and Beatrice of the society of such agreeable persons as Mrs. Somerton and her daughter.

“Now, then, we shall really be able to ramble over the old house,” said Elfrida, with a feeling of reviving hope, which almost made her wonder at herself.

It was a bright sunny morning, and she looked with a feeling of gladness on those windows which could be seen through the trees from where she now stood. Mrs. Dronington had told them that wing contained the late Lady Lillyford's room, and she believed that was one of the corners of

the large bay Mrs. Somerton had seen so plainly in her dream. For once the proof-sheets were thrown aside, to take their chance of being ready or not for post, and the eager pair started hopefully on their walk to the Hall. They entered the park by the south lodge, from which there was a short cut—a footpath which led by the little chapel direct to the house ; but as they wished to see as much of the fine park as possible, they proceeded along the carriage drive. This wound up a gentle slope through splendid oaks to an eminence which commanded a lovely view over undulating ground, fern-clad dells, winding streams, and all those graceful accessories of an old English park. On the west and north there was a large expanse of wood, for Oakhampton Park joined that of Ferncote, where the beeches were as celebrated for their size, beauty, and antiquity, as the oaks of Oakhampton—or Oxenden, as it was called in some of the old maps and registers.

From this high spot a better view could be obtained of Ferncote than of the Hall, which was concealed on that side by the groves of ilexes, hollies, and weeping box-trees, which sheltered the terraced gardens from northern blasts. Here they paused to look around with delight. The grey stone walls of Ferncote, with its projecting mullioned windows and numerous gables, standing on a gentle slope above the river, and embosomed in splendid trees, was a beautiful object in the sunny landscape.

“And to think that Lady Lillyford would not visit the inhabitants of that beautiful old place!” said Elfrida. “What a strange and perverse woman!”

“Yes, I am afraid she is very silly. I am almost glad she is going to try London; perhaps a season or two there may bring her to her senses.”

“Really! Well, this is the first time I ever heard you prescribe London as a remedy for defects in character.”

“Not often, certainly, but it does sometimes succeed in a small degree, and——”

“Oh ! how beautiful !” exclaimed Elfrida, as a sudden turn in the road brought them in sight of the south front of Oakhampton Hall.

It was built round a courtyard, and passing under the heavy centre gateway, surmounted by the time-worn armorial bearings of the Lillyford family, they rang the deep-toned bell, which resounded among the picturesque towers and gables of the interior, and seemed to impress them more sadly with its desolation. It was answered by a young girl, who, in reply to Mrs. Somerton’s inquiry, said that the housekeeper left in charge of the house had gone out, and she did not know when she would return that morning.

Here was a disappointment. There was nothing for it but to wait until the next day, therefore Mrs. Somerton left word that she would return the following morning and

begged that the locksmith might be there to open the cabinet, into which Sir Charles had given her leave to search.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Lady Lillyford carries her point, and a Large House is taken for the Season in London.

LADY LILLYFORD succeeded in persuading Sir Charles to take a house for the season in London, and they soon moved from Mrs. Dronington's small one in Wimpole Street, where there was only one spare bed-room, to a more roomy one in Portman Square. It had good reception-rooms, "for they must give some parties," Lady Lillyford said, "otherwise Beatrice will not have much gaiety."

"And who will come to your parties?" inquired Sir Charles. "You forget that we know scarcely anybody in England, having been away so long."

“Oh! dear Lady Horatia Nolan will find us plenty of people. You know she gets those Gubbingses girls everywhere, and I am sure we——”

“We ought not to require that kind of pushing,” said Sir Charles. “If you had been willing to do your duty in our own county, you would not have wanted London gaieties, or to be introduced by any great lady. But here we are, however, so we must only make the best of it; and—my clubs are pleasant enough; there’s a capital cook at the ‘Wanderer’s!’”

For the first fortnight or three weeks, Lady Lillyford found London extremely dull. It was still early in the year, and nothing was given by any one with whom she was acquainted. At last an old friend of Mrs. Dronington’s, Mrs. Dashville, gave a ball, and sent them an invitation. Lady Horatia Nolan had not come to London yet, but her son, Sir Richard, was in town, for Sir Charles had met him several times at his club. As

Mrs. Dashville was a relation of Lady Horatia's, Lady Lillyford expected he would certainly be at the ball; and as it was her pet scheme to bring about a match between him and Beatrice, she was very particular about her daughter's dress.

Beatrice herself looked forward to the ball with much delight, and fully entered into her mother's anxiety to choose a becoming dress. She was obliged to acknowledge to herself that she was anxious and, moreover, was fully aware of the reason. She thought it possible that Arthur Brookfield might have returned home from his tour in the East, and he might possibly be at this very ball. In the novels she had read such unexpected meetings often occurred, and she continually found herself thinking of what he might say or how he would look, and the loving expression of his dark blue eyes as she had last seen them nearly a year ago, became more and more vivid to memory's eye.

She was sometimes so absent that she

scarcely heard what her mother said, otherwise she might have been surprised to hear how often Lady Lillyford talked of that dear clever Sir Richard Nolan, and asked whether she did not remember thinking him so very agreeable the summer they met him at the baths of Lucca. Beatrice had very little recollection of having thought so, but as her mother seemed to wish that he should be admired, she assented.

“Now, mind you make yourself agreeable to him if—when you see him at the ball, and don’t be shy and backward, as you sometimes used to be, for you know he is a very fine gentleman here, and all the young ladies are making up to him.”

Beatrice did not quite understand, if that was the case, why she was cautioned not to be backward. But her mind was so pre-occupied with its own simple interests, that it took a very indistinct impression of Lady Lillyford’s meaning; and as Sir Richard had been to her an object of pure indifference,

not even amounting to absolute dislike, she made no remarks on her mother's advice, and the subject dropped.

Mrs. Dronington no longer went to balls, but she came to their house to see her daughter and Beatrice attired in their ball dresses, and was much struck with her granddaughter's beauty. The dress was very becoming and the vague expectation of meeting Arthur Brookfield gave an unusual colour to her cheeks and lustre to her sometimes too sleepy eyes.

"She will be very much admired," thought the fond grandmother, and she was right.

Yet that evening the dancing began and two quadrilles were over before Beatrice had any partner. They met Sir Richard Nolan, and Lady Lillyford exerted all her efforts to keep him near, and tried to make her daughter join in the conversation. But he did not seem inclined to ask Beatrice to dance. He said the ball was too crowded, "and it is impossible to victimize oneself,"

he added as a string of fat dowagers bore down on them from the supper-room and separated him from Lady Lillyford and Beatrice, apparently not much to his regret. Just then Miss Clemmy Gubbings, who was really good-natured, and saw Beatrice had not yet danced, brought up a young gentleman of no particular name or attraction, and introduced him to her, and Beatrice found herself hurried off to her place in the quadrille. She was glad to dance because it enabled her to see more, and she looked around in all directions, but no man resembling Arthur Brookfield could be seen. But presently, not far off, she saw a young girl with dark blue eyes, so like—so wonderfully like his, looking at her with an expression of anxious interest. What was still more strange, the eyes followed her as she moved in the dance, and she soon became aware that another, an older lady, was watching her also.

“Who are those—that pretty fair young

girl with golden hair and the other standing near her in blue?" she inquired of her partner.

"I—I don't know," he said, putting up his glass; "she must be quite noo—never saw her before."

"How very pretty! don't you think so?"

"Ha, yes," said he, afraid of committing himself to an opinion. "Well, yes, perhaps, when she has been out a little longer, but she's very unformed; not much to say for herself, I should think."

"I wish I could ascertain who she is," said Beatrice, somewhat heedless of her partner's words.

"Not very easy, I should think, for she seems to know nobody here, except that tall, thin lady; and she looks so amused as if she had never been at a London ball in her life before."

Mr. O'Mally—for that was his name—had not been to many himself, for it was his first season, but he was of the undemonstrative

and cautious type of Irishmen who, in the endeavour to conceal what they consider the vulgar Irish brogue, fall into the opposite extreme which produces such words as a "Meejer," and "pleese" for place, &c. This genus will never be induced to admire anything, or to evince any pleasure.

When the dance ended Beatrice insensibly drew her partner towards the place where those two were still standing. She longed to hear their voices, but they both seemed too much engrossed in their observation of herself to speak.

"I want to speak to Miss Gubbings," said Beatrice, "the young lady that introduced me to you," continued she, on seeing that her partner did not appear to know who she meant.

"Gubbings! never heard the name before," he said, putting up his glass and looking all round.

"Never heard her name! I mean the young lady there with red camellias in her

hair and red trimmings to her dress, and there is her sister; are you really not acquainted with them?"

"Oh, I remember now; yes, friends of the Norrises, taken up by Lady Horatia Nolan. I know now all about them, but really such a name one could not be expected to remember."

"Do tell me," said Beatrice, as soon as they had succeeded in searching out Miss Gubbings, "who that beautiful fair girl is there in blue?"

"Where?" said Miss Gubbings, "there are so many in blue."

"There, just by the fat gentleman in the corner."

"Don't know—never saw her before—quite new."

"That is just the observation I made," said Mr. O'Mally, "for she seems to know nobody."

At the next moment the object of their remarks was led to the dance by a very hand-

some and disingushed-looking man, and Miss Gubbings exclaimed,

“Why, who in the world could have believed it? It seems she is actually going to dance with the young Marquis of Ulswater.”

Mr. O'Mally put up his glass with unwonted energy, for he had once seen the Marquis, and had a great wish to know him.

“Oh, ah, so she is; and rather a fine looking girl, don't you think?” This was addressed to Miss Gubbings.

“Well, I can't say I admire her much—too large eyes—bad mouth, and no air—no *tournure*, and her dress certainly was not made in Paris.”

“No, badly dressed, and wants a good *coiffure* too,” said the would-be critical Mr. O'Mally.

“Cannot you ascertain who she is?”

“Oh! yes, easy enough now,” said Miss Gubbings, “for everybody in the room will be asking.”

It was a waltz. The young fair girl was

continually occupied in the dance with her partner, still, as she passed near where Beatrice stood, her dark blue eyes seemed to search for and fix themselves upon her with the same expression of interest.

Beatrice was standing near the tall thin sister, and she heard her say to the fat old lady next to her, in a voice that startled her by its resemblance to Arthur's,

"I cannot bear that dance. I am so sorry Rosa was persuaded into it."

"Oh ! you must get over such foolish prejudices," said the fat lady ; "besides, you ought to be so proud of the Marquis wishing so to be introduced to her—such an unusual thing for him to do. What a pity you are not going to stay in town ; your sister would become quite the fashion."

"Very lucky we are not," was the tall lady's answer, accompanied by a severe look. "I could never stand these hours, and I should not like to see my sister given up to such worldly pleasures, I am sure."

Lady Lillyford came up at this moment, and Beatrice's partner made a low bow and retired. Lady Lillyford was rather cross at his not having asked to be introduced to her, and said,

"Come away, Beatrice, come, I want some tea."

"Oh! mamma, don't you admire that young lady? Do let us ask Mrs. Dashville who she is."

"Why do you want to know? I'm sure I don't care."

"But she is so pretty, and so like——"

"So like whom? Why can't you speak out, girl? Well, never mind—I must have some tea."

They went into the room, and there they met Mrs. Dashville, who, seeing Beatrice not engaged, introduced her to a young man who was standing near, and he asked her for the next dance.

"There, the valz is over, and we must make haste or we shall get no *vis-à-vis*,"

said he. "Ho, Stuart, get a parner, and be our *vis-à-vis*," he said to a tall man in the doorway.

"Well, let me see, who is there? H'm, I'll get introduced to the new beauty the Marquis has brought, Miss What's-her-name?"

"How I wish I could ascertain who she is," said Beatrice to her partner, and added, "Do make him tell us."

"Because she's new? that's all. I daresay Mrs. Dashville even does not know; but never fear, she will soon be celebrated. See there, Stuart has managed it. What a clever fellow he is!—actually taken her off from the Marquis's arm. Did you ever see such effrontery? Well done! Now then we have our *vis-à-vis*." And to her extreme satisfaction Beatrice found herself dancing opposite to the stranger.

"Well, you have not yet asked your friend who she is," said Beatrice to her partner.

“I will, but I daresay we shall be none the wiser. It was something like Fernery or Fairy.”

“That name was not at all like Brookfield, certainly,” thought Beatrice; “why should she resemble *him* then so strangely?”

“But you shall ask Stuart yourself,” he added, “for he wants to be introduced to you for the next dance.”

When the dance was concluded Mr. Stuart was introduced; and after a few moments’ talk, she asked,

“What was the young lady’s name whom you were dancing with just now? I cannot believe it’s Fernery.”

“Not exactly,” he said, smiling; “it is Fairleigh, and I hear they live near Holington.”

“Then they live in the beautiful old place near us, and I suppose that is why she looked at me so much,” thought Beatrice, with a mixture of disappointment and pleasure, for she had often admired Ferncote

much, and longed to know its inmates.

“If they are such near neighbours, how is that you are not acquainted?”

“They—that is, we only went there this winter,” said Beatrice, who did not like to explain to a stranger her mother’s dislike of country neighbours.

“Well, shall I introduce you now? I see Miss Fairleigh looks as if she wished it.”

“Oh! yes, do; but stay—I suppose, I must ask mamma,” said Beatrice, with much embarrassment. “She is so—so particular.”

“Oh! oh!—well, just as you like, of course. I think your *chaperon* is in the tea-room,” said Mr. Stuart, when the waltz ended.

“Yes,” said Beatrice, who now longed to ask her mother whether she might be introduced to the interesting girl.

“Oh! no, no—what’s the use of it?—only implicate us when we go back. Now, come away; I’m quite tired.”

It is certain that if Lady Lillyford had

known that she had been dancing that evening with the greatest *parti* of the day, and should hear that she was sister to Arthur Brookfield, she would have acted very differently.

But it never occurred to the simple-minded Beatrice to tell her mother who the beautiful girl had been dancing with ; and she herself was, of course, still in ignorance that the stranger, who reminded her so much of Arthur Brookfield, was really his sister.

They were destined not to be enlightened either then or subsequently, for the Miss Fairleighs, who had only come to town on law business, returned home two days afterwards. Thus was lost one of those opportunities of an explanation which never repeat themselves.

CHAPTER XXVII.

*Lady Lillyford finds the London Season very
Up-hill Work.*

LADY LILLYFORD came down to breakfast in a very bad humour the next morning, and was loud in her complaints of Sir Richard Nolan's rudeness.

"He actually never asked her to dance," she said to Sir Charles, "and pretended it was too crowded; and then I saw him afterwards dancing with that little flirt, Mrs. Winchfield. By-the-by, she has got a fine house in Belgrave Square—write down her address, Beatrice; we'll call there to-day. And now, who were those men you did dance with at last?—and who was the one who found our carriage for us?"

“Mr. O’Mally, I think, was the name. But I did not hear any of the others, except one—a Mr. Stuart, a very tall man, who had been dancing with that pretty Miss Fairleigh of Ferncote.”

“Oh! ho! so you were obliged to meet some of our country neighbours at last?” said Sir Charles, as he looked up from the *Times*.

“Yes, but I would not be introduced to them. Well, but now, Beatrice, do help me to remember who that Mr. O’Mally is; he seemed the only man who was at all civil to us, and I can’t help thinking he may be related, perhaps, to those O’Mallys we met at Baden. Where is the *Court Guide*? Let’s see whether they have a house in town. O—O—M—George—John—Edward—no, let me see, it was a name like a surname, I remember. I have it—Driscoll O’Mally—that is it—No. 110, Hyde Park Terrace. I’ll go there this very morning, for they were intimate with the best Baden set.”

“Of gamblers,” suggested Sir Charles from behind the *Times*.

“Well, that’s no concern of ours ; there, they are in a good house, and no doubt give pleasant parties.”

“We have found it a concern of ours, to our cost,” grumbled Sir Charles ; “and, moreover, you’ll find it still more a concern of ours if we have to cut down our establishment, and give up our London house to pay Roland’s debts.”

“Oh ! it was all that nasty Count de Roulette ; you know very well that he has given it up now.”

“I wish I did know it,” answered Sir Charles, staring doggedly at the opposite wall.

“Well, well,” said Lady Lillyford, impatiently, “I’ll go early, and find them at home, so come, let’s ring the bell and order the carriage.”

“And don’t forget to call on the Templemores,” said Sir Charles ; “you know they

are distant relations of mine, and I met him at the club, and he said he should be glad to make your acquaintance. Their house is in Park Street, Westminster."

"Oh! dear, what a long way off; and I have always heard they are such dull people—no chance of their giving anything, I'm sure."

"Probably not; but they are very great people, and the second daughter's quite a beauty, I'm told, so you'll be sure to meet them about in the world."

"I doubt that, for they are so very old-fashioned—so I heard at Carlsbad; you know they had been there the summer before."

"Well, that may be; but I beg you will call on them. Now, remember, Beatrice, put down their names."

The carriage was ordered, and as Beatrice had promised to be at home in the afternoon, at her mother's request, to practise some duets with the Miss Gubbingses, who

were to call at four, Lady Lillyford proceeded alone to make her visits.

“That little flirt,” Mrs. Winchfield, was the first she had on the list, and she had the satisfaction of finding her at home. The O’Mallys were out. So were some others ; and as it was still early, she had no excuse for not finishing her list, and so directed the footman to drive to Mr. Templemore’s, Westminster.

“What a place to poke themselves into,” she muttered, as she passed up a dark staircase. “I’m sure these people can be of no use to us.”

She was shown into a long narrow room, the windows of which looked into St. James’s Park. Music was going on at the farther end, and many people were there besides Mrs. Templemore and her daughters. Lady Lillyford did not know them by sight, but Mrs. Templemore rose from her place near the piano when she heard the name, and shook hands with her very cordially.

“That’s my youngest daughter who is singing the duet,” she said in a whisper; “the other is out there in a brown dress near the fire.”

Lady Lillyford was obliged to confess to herself that the youngest was pretty, although on a very small scale. “Too short, certainly,” she thought; “and looks very delicate; but she has a fine voice.” A gentleman who was singing with her was such a perfect musician, that Lady Lillyford took it for granted he was a professor—probably her master, so she did not bestow much attention on him. She then turned to look at those around, and it seemed to her the ladies were all shabbily dressed, and were so plain and ordinary-looking, they never could belong to a good set. So she decided to go away as soon as the duet ended. When it was over, Mrs. Templemore introduced the daughter who had been singing, and the Marquis, whose name she did not hear; and as she was possessed with the

idea that he was a singing-master, she gave him a very cold bow, and then said she must go, for it was very late.

“Will you not stay to hear my niece play on the harp? She is such a beautiful player.”

“Thank you, not to-day. I am rather in a hurry; but I found Sir Charles wished me to call, so I came all this way round,” she said, with a condescending look, that amused Mrs. Templemore and her daughter.

As soon as she was gone, the eldest one said,

“Well, I’m glad you did not ask her to our Thursdays, for really I don’t much like her looks.”

“Nor I; but Sir Charles is a relation, and if I find her daughter is as pretty as her father told Mr. Templemore she is, I must ask them. Now, then, Marquis, if you are not too tired after all your dancing last night, let us have the solo. I hear you danced several times with a new beauty.”

“Yes, and very much pleased with her I was. Unluckily they are going away. She said it would be her only ball, for they were to leave London this very day.”

“But they will return, surely, for they are immensely rich, I hear,” said Mrs. Templemore.

“Well, I suppose they will; but,” he added in a low tone, turning to the youngest Miss Templemore, “it was really not so much her beauty I admired as it was her freshness of mind—she was so natural and evidently unworldly.”

“Is not everyone so?” asked Miss Templemore, with a malicious twinkle in her black eyes; “but you must tell us more about her after our music is over, for we are really interested; besides, we know her brother so well. You know he lived near us in the country before he succeeded to this other property; and I am so sorry that we have lost them as neighbours, though I ought not to regret it for their sakes, when they have

had such a fine place left them. By-the-by, it must be near Oakhampton Hall, which now belongs to that unpleasant-looking relation of ours who called here just now. I wonder whether she was able to appreciate that very agreeable girl and her nice serious elder sister? You know I like serious people," she added with a twinkle of fun in her brilliant eyes. "I approve of some of their notions—at least, I think they are on the safe side. You know I cannot make up my mind to approve of these late London balls, for while I am dancing very happily in beautiful rooms I always find myself wondering what the poor coachmen and footmen are doing all those hours, sometimes out in the rain."

"Don't say any more," said the Marquis. "If you set about making me think so seriously at the beginning of the season, I shall be obliged to leave London and go to my poor property in Ireland, to try and do some little good."

“Well, perhaps——”

“Perhaps I had better,” said he, looking earnestly into her dark eyes; but at this moment the eldest Miss Templemore came up, and asked whether he was going to Mrs. Manderton’s ball the next night.

“Here is your sister preaching against balls, and——”

“Oh! that is because the grapes are sour,” said Miss Templemore. “Selina gets so soon tired, and is fit for nothing the next day; but she has promised to go to the Mandertons, so I hope *you* will be there,” said she in a tone of playful decision, which made an elderly dowager who was near the door wonder whether the report she had heard the night before was true, that the Marquis really was going to marry that pretty Selina Templemore. She hoped it was, for she was a kindly old lady, and thought that the Marquis, whose mother was one of her oldest friends, and whom she had often nursed as a baby, could not do better.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Beatrice endeavours to amuse the Miss Gubbingses.

MEANWHILE Beatrice was doing her best to amuse the Miss Gubbingses, who came ostensibly to practise some duets. They seemed, however, more in the humour to talk, and wanted to hear her impression of the ball the night before. But the fact was, Beatrice had received no definite impression about it, except a shade of unacknowledged disappointment mingled with a very pleasant recollection of that pretty Miss Fairleigh. But as she shrank from the mention of either subject to the Gubbingses, she looked, as they afterwards said, very stupid and dull.

"But didn't you like any of your partners?" said Amelia, the elder Miss Gubbings; "and what did they say? I wonder none of them have called."

"Mr. O'Mally was here just before you came," said Beatrice; "but he did not come in, as mamma was not at home."

"And where is Lady Lillyford—gone to call on people, is she? I wish you would show me her visiting list," said Clementina.

"I don't know that she has any," was the reply, "except the one I made out for her, which she took:" and Beatrice mentioned the names she had written.

"The Templemores! Good gracious! is she gone there? Why, it's one of their Thursday musics: quite small and select—in fact, one of the most *recherché* things in London."

"Yes, they are wonderful musicians," said Amelia—"the two girls and their cousin, I mean, and they have the most perfect music, and everybody is dying to be asked;

even Lady Horatia, though she doesn't care a bit about music, she can't bear to be left out."

"No, she was quite furious at not being invited," said Clementina; "but my gracious goodness! Beatrice, don't you go and say I told you this," she exclaimed, with more energy than grace, and with an eagerness that made her accent savour strongly of her early maternal instruction.

"My dear Clemmy," said Amelia, "you forget you should never say 'goodness gracious;' remember how horrified Lady Horatia was once when you said it: seriously, I know Beatrice won't betray us. I suppose you are going to the Mandertons' ball to-morrow night?"

"I suppose so, for they are distant relations, too, of papa's, and very kindly told him they would like to see us."

"And the Templemores are relations too, are they? So they invited Lady Lillyford to come to their music, I suppose."

"Oh! no, it was quite chance; and in fact

she did not at all like to call there, because——”

“Because why?”

Beatrice did not like to give her mother's reasons as to their being stiff and old-fashioned people, for she felt that her mother was probably doing them an injustice, and she could find no other excuse except that they lived so far off.

“Oh! is that all? Why, everybody lives far off now; and, by-the-by, Clemmy, we are to dine early, to go to the play, and we must be off at once. Good-bye, then, we shall meet at the Mandertons', and I hope there will be a good set of men, for you didn't dance much last night, I'm afraid.”

Beatrice felt that she did not much care whether she had danced or not, for the sight of those dark blue eyes looking upon her so pleasantly had awakened still greater hopes and regrets in her heart, and she was incessantly wondering whether she should ever see Arthur Brookfield again.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Beatrice is startled by Miss Clemmy Gubblings' Mysterious Agitation.

THE next day Lady Lillyford was “enjoying,” as her maid called it, one of her bad headaches, and did not seem to like the idea of going to the Mandertons’ ball.

“I know they are such a dowdy set. You remember them, Beatrice, at Rome. They were always poking among the ruins all day, and never went out in the evening; and they are relations of Sir Charles, too—such a stiff, dull set generally, I’m sure those Templemores are. I never saw such a set of ill-dressed people as were at their house yesterday.”

“How very odd,” said Beatrice, “for Miss Gubbings said it was one of their Thursday parties, and so very *recherché*.”

“Well, if she calls that *recherché*, I can’t think what she means. I am sure I saw nothing fashionable. There was a lady, perhaps she was the governess, in quite a common—I do believe it was a cotton dress—half a dozen men and women, and a singing-master. Now, what are you going to wear?—not one of your best dresses, I should say. I want to keep them till dear Lady Horatia Nolan comes to town, and we go to some really good ball. I’m sure the Mandertons’ will not be that.”

“Shall I wear my pink tarlatane?—it’s not very fresh.”

“Yes, that will do; and let me see, I’ll wear my blue brocade; it’s quite stained, you know Roland spilt his coffee over it.”

Thus attired, two hours later Lady Lillyford and her daughter entered the dancing-room at Mrs. Manderton’s. Beatrice looked

well, in spite of the want of freshness in her dress, and as Lady Lillyford wore a Brussels lace shawl, the coffee-stains did not much mar the gorgeousness of hers. The house was larger than she expected, and there was a fine ball-room at the back, well lighted and decorated with choice flowers. She began to regret her coffee-stained dress, and felt less able to patronize the dowdy Mandertons than she had intended to do.

They received her with a cordiality that still more disconcerted her ; and one of the Miss Mandertons immediately found a partner for Beatrice, while her mother complimented Lady Lillyford on her daughter's beauty, and said,

"She was only fourteen, I think, when we met at Rome. She has grown very lovely since. So Sir Charles would not come? Too much addicted to his club, I fear."

She found Lady Lillyford a comfortable seat on the raised bench, where she could have a good view of the dancing, and then

returned to greet the guests who came pouring in.

Lady Lillyford could hear the names of several that were announced. She was surprised at the numbers of people of high rank, and still more regretted the coffee-stains, which she began to think showed even through her Brussels lace mantle. She saw so few persons with whom she was acquainted, that when the Templemores were announced she forgot the dowdiness of their dress, as she had called it, and was quite pleased to see them. The youngest daughter was not there, but the eldest was tolerably well dressed now, she thought, and they seemed to know everybody.

“How very strange,” thought she, as she observed an elderly lady, who had been announced as the Marchioness of Lorendale, greet them with extreme warmth, and find places for them to sit down beside her. “Could it be? Yes, it was indeed the person in the cotton dress she had seen

there the day before, and took for the governess. Well, it is not always rank that makes people the fashion, though," was Lady Lillyford's qualifying thought; "and I've always heard fashion is everything in London, and that a Duchess was excluded from Almack's formerly because she was vulgar-looking. So I daresay, after all, this Marchioness is a person of no importance."

Beatrice was dancing just opposite, and Lady Lillyford saw that the Templemores and the Marchioness were talking of her.

When the dance was over Lady Lillyford lost sight of Beatrice, but she determined to follow the Templemores, as she was tired of having no one to speak to. She succeeded in reaching them just as they were passing near the musicians, where a door led to the refreshment-room. A waltz was being played by the band in that loud and energetic manner which is considered inspiring, but is not favourable to conversation. Lady Lillyford endeavoured to make her greetings

heard by Mrs. Templemore. That lady seemed fully to understand, although she could not quite hear the words, and in return said something civil and complimentary about Beatrice.

“We have been admiring her very much, and so has Lady Lorendale,” she added, as she introduced Lady Lillyford to that ponderous dowager.

The former expressed her pleasure at making the acquaintance, and inwardly hoped the coffee-stains were not conspicuous.

“And I find your daughter has another admirer; he wishes to secure her for the next dance,” said Mrs. Templemore; and as she said this she beckoned to a gentleman who just then appeared. Mrs. Templemore mentioned the name of the Marquis of Uls-water, but just then a loud crowning crash of instruments, which often bespeaks the approaching end of a dance, overpowered the sound, and Lady Lillyford, to her dismay, found herself introduced to the singing-

mastershe had met the day before, and understood that he wished to engage her daughter for the next dance.

Her annoyance was so great, that she only acknowledged the intimation with the coldest of bows, and said she was certain her daughter was engaged for all the dances; and full of resentment at what she considered the impertinence of Mrs. Templemore, she turned away.

The Marquis was both surprised and amused at his unaccustomed rebuff, and whispering a few words to Mrs. Templemore, disappeared in the crowd.

Meantime, after the end of the first dance, Beatrice was escorted by her partner towards the upper bench, where they had seen her mother, but as the crowd impeded their progress for some moments, when at last they arrived there, she was not to be found. For a moment Beatrice was at a loss what to do, as her partner was evidently in a hurry to secure the lady to whom he

was engaged for the next dance, but fortunately Miss Clementina Gubbings came up and asked Beatrice to come and see the pictures in the next room.

“Come, quick,” she whispered, in a nervous, hurried manner, which almost startled Beatrice, from being so unlike her usual undemonstrative, or rather mechanically, well-taught good-breeding. “I do want so to speak to you, and you won’t mind losing one dance, will you? There are heaps of men I could introduce you to, but I really think that, like myself, you have something on your mind which prevents your enjoying the dancing as much as other girls do.”

Beatrice was surprised to find her real feelings were thus divined, for as she had never become intimate with either of the sisters, she had no idea that Clementina was aware of any cause for her anxiety or low spirits.

“Ah! you are surprised, but I know all about it; I know——”

Here they were interrupted by a gentleman, who said he had been searching everywhere for Miss Gubbings, and wished to secure her for the next dance.

“No, not the next—the third afterwards, if you like; but look, there is little Julia Fergusson not dancing; do go and ask her—there, quick! for she is very pretty, and will soon be carried off, if you don’t make haste.”

“But I don’t care for Julia Fergusson—I only want——”

“Well, but I don’t,” she said, with a half angry, impatient gesture. “I want to show my friend the pictures, and as you have no taste for art, you would only be in our way,” and pulling Beatrice quickly through the crowded doorway, they soon arrived in the comparative solitude of the farther drawing-room.

“I daresay we shall be interrupted here very soon, so do tell me at once when I could contrive to see you alone. I have so

much to say," she added, with a deep blush, and in an agitated manner. "You are quite surprised, I see; you thought me a cold, commonplace young lady, who thought of nothing but fashion and the world. I see you did. I often wish I was so really, for I am very, very miserable," and the tears started to her eyes.

"What is it?—can I be of any use?" asked Beatrice, who was touched by her evident distress.

"Oh! yes, you can; and it would be such a comfort if you knew all, and could advise me in any way. There, I see those tiresome Ashtons coming. Quick!—tell me where I could see you, and—and I don't want my sister to know."

"Well, let me see; I daresay I could stay at home to-morrow afternoon, as I suppose mamma will drive, but it is really uncertain, for she may want me, and I suppose you would not wish her to know, would you?"

“Not for the world!”

“Well, if you like to come for the chance, I will try to remain at home.”

“Yes, do ; say you have got a bad headache, or something, for I must see you. There, those Ashtons are coming, and there will be no getting away. So we must only submit, and I will introduce you, for they are people you ought to know ; and the son is a great *parti*. Ah ! there he is too, so he may perhaps be your next partner.” The introduction was then made, and Beatrice found herself again hurried into the ball-room, while she was still wondering what Clementina could have to say to her, and what could make her so miserable. Mr. Ashton made himself very agreeable, and Beatrice quite reproached herself for being so absent and stupid, for she could not help looking in all directions for the dark blue eyes of that pretty Miss Fairleigh. But, alas ! they were nowhere to be seen. At length she bethought herself that perhaps

Mr. Ashton might be acquainted with her, so she abruptly asked him.

“No, he had not that pleasure—did not think he had ever seen her.”

“But she was at Mrs. Dashville’s ball last Thursday, and she was very much admired.”

“Oh! I was not there—I only came to town yesterday.”

“I want so much to see her again,” said Beatrice. “She is very beautiful; and besides, there are many reasons which interest me about her—they live near us in —shire,” said Beatrice; “it is such a beautiful old place.”

“She is a great friend of yours, then, I suppose?”

“No, I have never been introduced to her; and—”

The surprise depicted on Mr. Ashton’s face at this announcement recalled to Beatrice how strange it must seem that she was not acquainted with a near neighbour

in the country whom she admired so much, but not liking to explain her mother's objections, she became extremely embarrassed.

Mr. Ashton was puzzled, but he put it down to shyness, and as the dance was just ending, he did not take any further trouble to elucidate the matter, but merely asked, when it was concluded, where she would like to go.

"There, I see mamma at last, by the door—I had lost sight of her for a long time."

She found Lady Lillyford very tired with the heat and crowd, and quite ready to go home, if anybody would "have the civility to call her carriage." This was said with a significant look at Mr. Ashton, whom Beatrice had introduced; but as she knew he was engaged for the next dance, which was just beginning, she felt it would be very inconvenient to him to go in search of it. So she tried to persuade her mother to have some tea, observing that they would be sure

to find some person in the refreshment-room who would call their carriage.

“Ah! that’s just like you, the moment I am tired now, you want to stay,” said Lady Lillyford, who was in one of her worst humours.

“Not that, really; I don’t wish to stay—indeed I don’t.”

Mr. O’Mally came up at that moment, and asked Beatrice to dance either this or the next dance.

She was about to refuse him, when her mother pinched her arm and whispered,

“Don’t be so foolish—go and dance; and then,” she added, with a condescending look at Mr. O’Mally, “and then perhaps you will have the kindness to call our carriage, for I am rather tired.”

In spite of her pink tarlatane dress being none of the freshest, Beatrice was very much admired, and as her mother watched her progress through the dance, she was gratified to see the looks of admiration caused

by her beauty ; and she saw that at the end of it several good-looking men were brought up by Miss Gubbings, and also by Mrs. Manderton, the hostess herself, to be introduced.

“She is beautiful,” thought the gratified mother, “and she ought to be a duchess, that she ought ;” and then she began to think over the good *partis* which that little flirt, Mrs. Winchfield, had told her of. The Marquis of Ulswater was at the end of the list, and he was very handsome and rich, Lady Lillyford had heard, and visions of future triumphs, as the mother-in-law of a Marchioness, gleamed gorgeously in her excited imagination. Ambition was not a strong quality in her, but at times when she became sufficiently excited to care much for anything, it was capable of being stimulated into a state of activity, and it was so now. But Beatrice would not accept any of the partners offered, because she thought her mother wanted to go. So she came up to her, followed by several men, who expressed

the regret they felt, and whom, as they seemed to wish it, she introduced to her mother as well as she could, not having heard any of their names distinctly. By the assistance of one or two of the most eager the carriage was soon called, and Lady Lillyford had the mingled gratification and disappointment of seeing that her daughter had made quite a sensation. ; it might have been still more marked if she had not so foolishly taken her at her word and got the carriage called.

“She is so silly, she will mar her own prospects,” was the last thought in Lady Lillyford’s mind before she went to sleep.

CHAPTER XXX.

Lady Lillyford gets confused with her visiting list.

BEATRICE was for some time unable to sleep, for there had been much to startle and perplex her. She could not avoid seeing that many people admired her, but she was conscious of feeling that all their admiring looks gave her less pleasure than the earnest gaze of that pretty Miss Fairleigh.

“That is only because she is so like Arthur,” thought Beatrice. “I shall never be able to care for anyone else;” and then she began to wonder more than ever why she had seemed to care so much less for him when they were together than she did now. “I feel as if I had grown so many years

older since then," thought she. "I really was such a child, it was no wonder he did not care." And yet the recollection of his expressive face when last they met seemed to assure her that he did. "How strange, too," thought Beatrice, "Clementina Gubbings looked to-night as if she knew of it. I quite liked her, and she seemed so very miserable ; what can it be about ?" Still wondering, she at last fell asleep, and dreamt that she was at the same ball, and Miss Gubbings brought up Arthur Brookfield, who asked her to dance, and she was very happy but not at all surprised to see him. He waltzed more delightfully than ever ; and then she thought they were at Oakhampton, in the long drawing-room, and Clementina Gubbings was pointing out of the bay window to the beautiful old oak trees, and told her that those fine trees would soon be cut down, and she was crying ; and Beatrice felt suddenly very unhappy, for she had often been haunted by the dread of seeing her favourite

grove destroyed. Then she thought Arthur looked angry, and said her brother Roland did not deserve to inherit such a beautiful place, and it would all go to ruin. Then Clemmy Gubbings cried and threw her arms round her neck and said, "Oh, let me save him! only forgive me. Forgive me, for I did it for the best. He must not be arrested—oh! let me save him!" She looked round for Arthur, in hopes he would be able to explain the meaning of these mysterious words, but he had disappeared in the darkness of the farther end of the gallery; and she tried to call out, for a sudden fear seized her, and she saw the ghost of that brown figure, which had appeared the last evening she had sat in that room, emerge from the darkness and glide across, its dark eyes flashing like coals of fire, just as her mother had described it. Nearer and nearer it came, and its eyes glared and seemed to scorch her, and she could not speak or move, and with a cry of oppression she awoke.

It was still early, and she saw, with a feeling of intense relief, that it was the dawn of day, but she was still oppressed with a feeling of horror at the vivid recollection of her strange dream. The delight of the first part, the waltz with Arthur, was less present to her mind than the perplexed anxiety about those favourite oaks and her brother Roland. That there was danger of his being arrested she had often heard, but why should Miss Gubbings think she could save him? And then she remembered having observed some looks of intelligence between her and Roland. It had seemed to her once as if they had some secret they did not wish anyone to know, but—but she cannot care for him, can she? was now the perplexing idea which this recollection, coupled with the dream, seemed to produce; and the more she thought of it, and recalled to mind sundry looks and words not dwelt on at the time, the more the idea possessed her that Clementina did care for Roland.

“And she is rich, too—perhaps she can save him and those beautiful oaks,” murmured Beatrice. “I liked her so much better last night than I ever did before. But what would Lady Horatia say if Roland really cared for Clementina?” There was something very terrible in the idea, for Beatrice had overheard her father say that he was sure she was in love with him, and indeed she did always seem to wish to engross his attentions. And the Miss Gubbings, who had so much cause to be grateful to her! Yes, it must be very embarrassing and painful to Clementina; and if this is true, would she really encounter Lady Horatia’s anger and take upon herself Roland’s debts? And would he make her a good husband? Perhaps not; and she began to pity Miss Gubbings from her heart, and to see how very sad it all must be, till at last she burst out laughing at the idea that after all it was only a dream. She would never have thought of the little scene at Oakhampton, their looks or perhaps

whisperings together, which might only be after all some commonplace joke, had not her dream and Miss Gubbings's words and looks in the dream set her imagination at work. "But yet that evening, when I found them in the orangery," she thought, "how they started at hearing my footsteps, and then looked relieved when they saw it was only me."

Hence this dream had the effect of making her still more anxious to secure the *tête-à-tête* Clementina wished to have. To manage this she found herself obliged to frame several excuses for not driving out with her mother that afternoon; and this, to her simple and truthful nature, was both embarrassing and painful. She blushed and hesitated, first complaining of a headache, and then, when her mother suggested that the air would do it good, said she must write a long letter to her grandmother, who had gone out of town for a little while, as she had promised to tell her all about the ball.

“Well, then, I suppose I must go without you, but I really get so confused with the list, not knowing the different directions and all those new terraces, that unless I have somebody to help me to think, I go round and round, and don’t get through half. There, put down the names as you think the streets come.”

“I’ll try, mamma; but you forget that I know less of London than you do.”

“No, but you have more time to think about it than I have; and put down Mrs. Winchfield, she’s a sad flirt I know, but I want her to tell me all about the young men, and who we should try to get to our ball, for we must give one. The O’Mallys said it was quite requisite.”

Beatrice sighed, for inexperienced as she was, it occurred to her that a ball must cost a good deal. And when her brother’s debts were so pressing as to induce her father to think of cutting down the oaks at Oakhampton (the recollection of which melan-

choly fact had been vividly recalled by her last night's dream), it seemed such a pity to incur what seemed to her the unnecessary cost of a ball.

“Yet I suppose it is very odd and unnatural in me to think of objecting to what most girls would like to do,” she thought; and then she almost reproached herself for being so engrossed by the recollection of Arthur Brookfield, as it made her so different from other young ladies.

CHAPTER XXXI.

The Strange Disclosure.

AT last the list was re-written to Lady Lillyford's satisfaction, and as the carriage had been waiting for some time at the door, she started on her visiting expedition.

It was now nearly three o'clock, the hour Miss Gubbings had appointed, and Beatrice stood at the window to watch for her in a state of eager curiosity and excitement, which she vainly tried to repress. In a few minutes she saw her walking quickly up to the door, looking back now and then as if to see that no one observed her, and a minute or two afterwards she entered the drawing-room.

“Now, where are we likely to be the least heard or interrupted, I wonder?” whispered Miss Gubbings.

“Let me see—oh! in the third drawing-room, I think, for the maid may be coming in and out of my room.”

So they hastened into the third drawing-room, and as soon as the door was gently closed, Clemmy threw herself on Beatrice’s neck and burst into tears.

“I have done very wrong—wrong in every way, I know; and—and—perhaps he is not worthy—but still I do love him so, and—and I cannot succeed in forgetting him; and since I knew you I love him still more, for with all his faults, you dear innocent creature, you are something like him. Poor Roland, if he would but give up that dreadful gambling! It—it has made him her slave. He can never do now as he wishes; and I do—indeed I do think he loves me still, but Meely declares he does not, and never did; and she will have it it

was only my fortune he wanted, and never cared for me."

Here Miss Gubbings' words were arrested by violent sobs, and Beatrice attempted in vain to comfort her.

"It would break my heart if I found he didn't care, but I am sure he did once—that summer when we were at Baden, and we used to walk up the beautiful forest; and, Beatrice, oh! how happy I was till Meely found it out, and declared I should not marry him, and talked and scolded so; but I would have stuck by him if he hadn't been obliged to go off suddenly because—oh! it was too dreadful—they said he had done something, and I don't believe it; it was all that nasty Count Roulette. So Meely would have it, and she told me so, and got those O'Mallys to talk and try to laugh me out of it. I—I had given him a cheque for—for a few hundred pounds, and Meely found it out and made such a fuss; and then he didn't write, or at least I didn't get his letters, though

he declared afterwards he had written, and that Meely must have intercepted them ; but I heard he was always with Lady Horatia, and of course had forgotten me ; and as she is so rich, too, and has rank besides, I began to think it was possible. So Meely worked on my pride, and I determined to forget him ; and she made me see that it would never do to quarrel with Lady Horatia, to whom we girls owed our position in the world. So I tried hard to act right, as I thought, and I flirted with other men ; and many wished to marry me, but I knew in their cases it was for my fortune."

"But did you care for him when you were at Oakhampton?" interrupted Beatrice.

"Yes, I found afterwards I had never ceased to care—never, but I was determined to act my part well, and wouldn't let any one know I had been deserted, least of all Lady Horatia. But I was afraid once or twice you suspected it. Did not you the evening when you found us in the orangery?"

It was almost the only time I trusted myself to speak to him, though he wrote me notes, and begged hard for an interview. He said it was only from dire distress, and fear of arrest, that he took to Lady Horatia. She had lent him several hundreds, and he felt bound not to quarrel with her—that he had heard that I was going to be married to—well, never mind—and so in despair he took up with her. I—I—half believed it. But the time is flying, and we may be interrupted before I have said the chief thing. I heard from him the day before yesterday, and he is in dreadful want of a thousand at once, to save him from arrest; and he declares if I can send it, and will consent to marry him—and—and—that my mother can be induced to—to consent to promise that I shall have as much as Meely—he will—he wants to marry me at once. So now what I want you to do is, to go with me to ma? I know she'd like and love you, and if you'll say you are his sister—for you do look

so good and innocent—so unlike all other girls, she'd be persuaded to consent, and I know Roland would reform if once we were married. I'm sure of it, and you'd have the delight of knowing that you'd not only saved your brother from prison now, but made him happy for life. Oh! do come with me to ma—pray, pray do !”

“Now? Where?” inquired Beatrice, who was quite bewildered with all she had heard. “I thought you wished your sister not to know of our meeting even to-day—how then?”

“Oh! she'd never know we went to see ma, for she scarcely ever goes near her; nor can I, except by stealth, for she lives still in the little old house in the city where pa died. Poor ma, she lost the use of her limbs many years ago; but she wanted us to be ladies, and so she would not interfere, and we were first taken up by Lady Horatia. Poor ma, I think now, often repents, for she feels so very lonely, and when she

sees we—that is, Meely—doesn't care for her, she takes it sadly to heart, I know. But she's got a great deal in her own power—though we have four thousand a year a-piece, and Roland, I know, ought to be satisfied with that, but he is so hard-up, and made so much of, it turns his head, and they all tell him nothing could be too good for him. And you see, if I give him the thousand pounds *now*, Meely would find it out, so I want poor dear ma to give it. So now, do come, to save your brother from prison. I'll manage it so that no one will ever know it. If you'll be in the Square to-morrow at any hour you think best, I'll have a cab in the next street, and we'll go there. I do think you'd like poor ma, for you are always so full of pity for old and infirm people; and how she would love your beautiful face—how it would comfort her to think your brother wanted me to marry him.”

“Oh! but really I can't go with you. Papa—or, oh! if granny were but in

town she would advise me what to do."

"But no one must know it—if you tell anyone it would be sure to come round to Lady Horatia, and all would be lost."

"But Lady Horatia must hear of it if you marry him."

"Not till it is safe over. But I know it will never be, unless you come and help persuade ma. She has been kind to me, and—knows how I love him, though she is afraid he will not treat me well; but if she were to see you, his own beautiful sister, I'm sure she'd consent."

All this was most perplexing to Beatrice, who had great misgivings that her brother would not prove a good husband. It seemed cruel to prevent what Miss Gubbings seemed so anxious for, and what would save her brother from arrest.

"I—I really don't know what to do or say, I am so very silly, and can never act a part; they'd be sure to find out, and besides, mamma would miss me, and make

such an outcry. I should never be able to keep it secret."

"Oh! yes, you would, I'm sure, if you would but remember that your dear brother's fate depends on it. I know you would. There, now, you will consent?—just promise to be in the Square to-morrow at three o'clock."

"But I had great difficulty to-day in getting off driving, and I know I made very lame excuses—I never can succeed in telling what is not true. I know I am so very stupid. Oh! not to-morrow; I'll try the following day. I know mamma will want me to-morrow."

"Well, then, I'll try to put it off; but oh! it is very urgent, you see, for if Roland once gets into prison, there'll be no end of debts come up against him."

"Well, I'll try to-morrow, then; but what shall I say? Do find some excuses for me to remain at home; and then, if she comes home before I get back, what then?"

“Leave word you are walking in the Square, and she won’t think of sending to see whether you are there or not ; the trees are thick, and you would be screened from the windows, and if by any chance she found you were not there, you could say afterwards that you saw me, and I wanted you to go with me to a milliner’s shop in Vere Street to try something on. There, now, that would do, and you will be there ; and now I must run away, for fear Meely should suspect anything ; she watches me as a cat watches a mouse.”

And before Beatrice had time to make more objections to the plan, the experienced young lady had left the room.

Beatrice felt so bewildered by all this astounding intelligence, that for some time she scarcely realised it, or felt conscious of having promised to accompany Clementina to her mother’s house in the City.

She was still in the third drawing-room, revolving these difficulties in her mind,

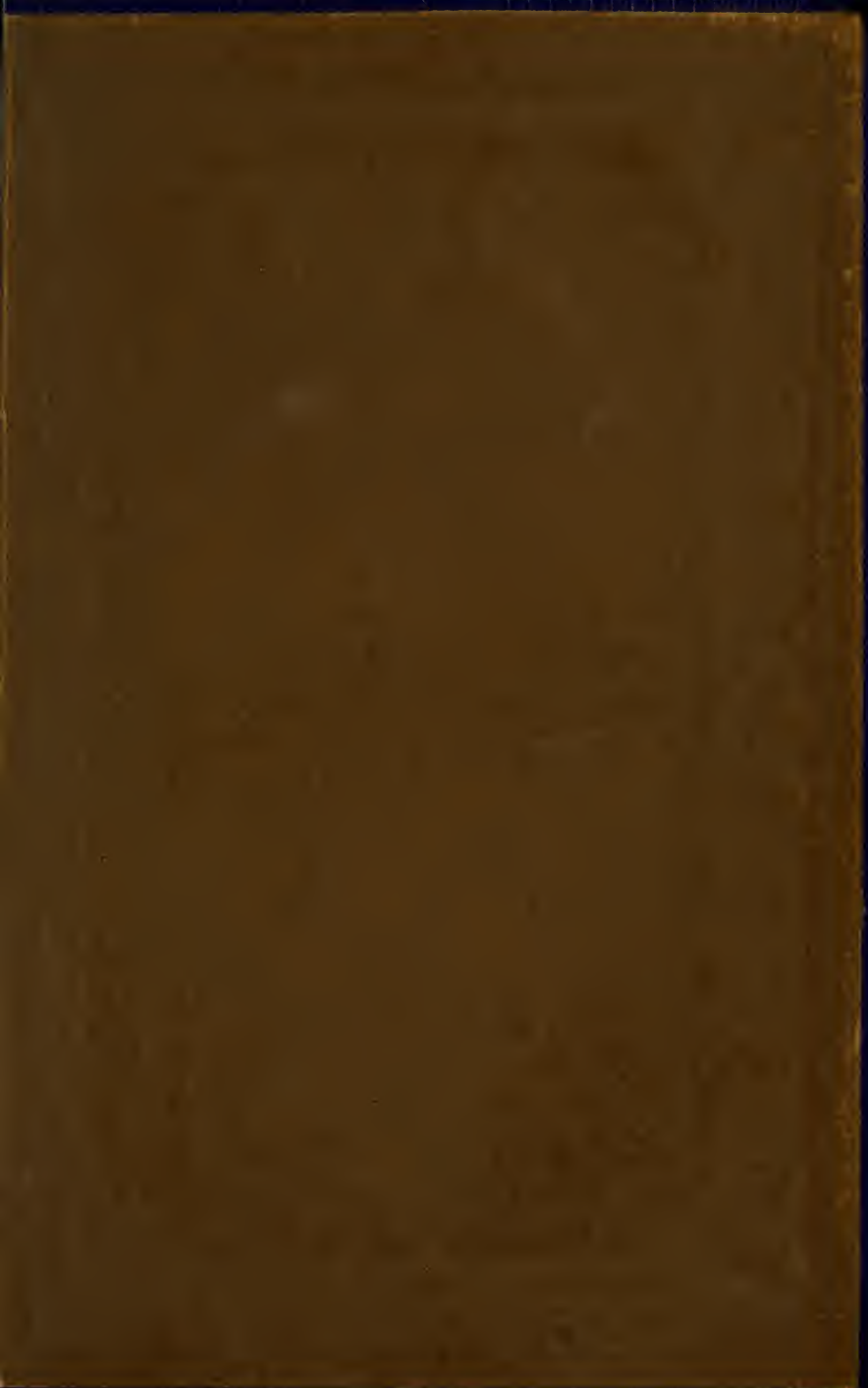
when she heard a knock at the hall door. Awakened to a sense of her risks and responsibilities by the apprehension of her mother's searching looks and inquiries, she hastened to assume her wonted place near the writing-table in the front drawing-room, and began a hurried letter to her grandmother. She trembled so much, that the lines were scarcely legible or coherent; but it fortunately turned out that Lady Lillyford was too full of the grievances and misadventures she had met with, to take much notice of her daughter. She began at once a long story, in which the footman's stupidity and the coachman's want of knowledge of London, were the predominating features, mingled with an undercurrent of annoyance at having heard that the Marquis of Ulswater had actually been at the ball the night before, and she had never known it. "Otherwise," she added, "I might really have made his acquaintance—you know Miss Gubbings told me so. I called there

at last, instead of going all the way back to Kensington, when I found that you—that was your fault—you had written down Palace Gardens, next to Grosvenor Place, when it's miles away from it."

As they were engaged out to dinner, Lady Lillyford thought it was high time to dress.

"And really there is no knowing here what kind of people one may not meet, so wear something nice. To think of the Marquis having been there last night, and you in a tumbled tarlatane, and me in a dress all over coffee stains!"

Beatrice was very glad to escape into the comparative publicity of a dinner-party from the observation of her mother, who, she could not help fancying, might remark some unwonted embarrassment in her look or manner.



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